

CLEVELY SAHIB

BY HERBERT HAYENS





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with all the

things that

CLEVELY SAHIB



(579)

The gate clanged ominously behind us (p. 58)

CLEVELY SAHIB

A TALE OF THE KHYBER PASS

BY

HERBERT HAYENS

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“UNDER THE LONE STAR,” ETC.

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CLEVELY SAHIB.

CHAPTER I.

STRANGERS AND EXILES.

“PAUL!”

I moved uneasily on the soft mattress, and at a repetition of the sound half opened my eyes.

The mellow light from the shaded lamp fell across my father's features, and I rose instantly, for he appeared grave and troubled.

“Rouse yourself, boy,” he said kindly; “I have strange news for you.”

The day had been a harassing one, but at these words all thoughts of fatigue vanished. We were living in stirring times, when a man had need not only of a strong arm but a clear brain, if he wished to preserve his head safely upon his shoulders.

I never knew the precise reasons which had induced my father as a young man to enter the service of Runjit Singh, but my earliest recollections carry me back to Lahore, the princely city of the Punjab, where that powerful potentate held his state.

I have a faint recollection of a tall, fair woman, with soft brown eyes and luxuriant chestnut hair, who carried me in her arms and covered my face with burning kisses.

Sometimes in these later days my heart leaps at the sound of simple tunes familiar in the nursery—tunes which hushed me to sleep in that far-off land of strange people and barbaric splendour.

I remember vividly when my mother died, though I must have been very young. I can picture the chamber of death now, with its odd mixture of Oriental magnificence and English comfort and simplicity.

My father placed me in her arms, and she hugged me closely, kissing me and calling me her “little darling,” her “baby Paul.”

As yet I had no knowledge of death, but I felt a vague consciousness that my mother was in trouble, and in my childish way tried to comfort her. I played with the long hair lying loosely on the pillow, and pressing my cheek to hers, begged her to get up and come with me into the city.

At this a fresh source of wonder opened out: my father bowed his head and wept.

Presently he stooped down and put his lips to my mother's, it seemed for a long, long time as if he could not draw them away, and then I heard her whisper—only I could not recognize the voice, it seemed to come from a long distance off—“Good-bye, dear husband; good-bye, my bonnie wee bairn.”

I cried a little when my father, taking me from her arms, carried me up and down the spacious room ; and for many days afterwards I wandered disconsolately to and fro, searching for my lost mother, calling her name aloud, and totally unappeased by the information that she had departed on a far journey.

But my grief was that of a child, and soon subsided.

It is from this time I date the beginning of my deep affection for my father.

Oftentimes his duties compelled him to be absent, occasionally for days together, but every moment that could be snatched from the rajah's service was devoted to me.

By his enemies he has been described, I am aware, as a man of a haughty and imperious nature, with boundless ambition, yet rigid and unbending as fate. I am little concerned, however, to defend his public character, since even his most bitter opponent did not dare to whisper a syllable against his probity and love of truth. In my memory he will always dwell as the best father boy ever had.

Let me endeavour to draw a simple picture of him as he appeared then.

In figure he was tall and of a noble presence. His short, crisp black hair was interspersed with threads of grey, and brushed well back from a broad forehead. The upper lip was hidden by a heavy brown moustache, and he wore a beard closely cut. His eyes, which were shaded by long silky lashes, were of a deep blue, swiftly

changing in expression, now soft and of a womanish tenderness, now bright and piercing as the eagle's.

But I love best to linger over the memory of his earnest yet kindly smile. I could not understand its deep pathos then, but since that time I have gained experience, and know now that it was associated with my mother's death. He never mentioned her name—his grief was too sacred a thing to be displayed even before me—but I am persuaded that she was never absent from his thoughts.

Whether the fact was owing to some fixed principle or to his great love for me I cannot determine, but he was my sole teacher, though in the modern sense I never received lessons.

His great talent, I imagine, must have lain in languages, as he was an excellent and accomplished linguist. He spoke Persian with remarkable fluency, using it habitually as his common mode of expression, though his position at Runjit Singh's court made it necessary that he should be conversant with numerous and widely-different tongues.

Thus it came about that as a child I was an unconscious student of the soft, smoothly-flowing Oriental speech, and without trouble or drudgery grew to be proficient in many languages.

But my father was far too wise to cultivate the mind at the expense of the body. He taught me to run and leap, to ride fearlessly yet with a certain prudence withal, to shoot, fence, swim, and, above all, to endure pain without murmuring.

Neither was my moral education neglected. From him

I learned the beauty of truth and kindness, the value of obedience, the distinction between real courage and recklessness, and the worth of simple, manly dignity.

As I write, one incident stands out clearly across the years, and will serve to illustrate forcibly the gentleness of his nature.

The city was in gala dress for some public rejoicing. For two or three days the people had abandoned themselves to merry-making and enjoyment, and it had been arranged to hold, on the last day of the feast, a grand pony race in the presence of the rajah and his courtiers.

To this I looked forward with intense delight, as my father agreed that I should ride my pony, and I wished ardently to show that his riding-lessons had not been given in vain.

The spectacle was a magnificent one. Seated on a superb throne was the maharajah, his gorgeous tunic heavy with gold and studded with precious stones. His crown was covered with glittering diamonds, amidst which shone conspicuously the matchless Koh-i-noor, like a sun in the centre of its satellites.

Around him, on rich carpets edged with mats of gold, were grouped his high officers, dressed in apparel scarcely less splendid than his own.

At various parts of the course were stationed his horse-soldiers in picturesque attire, each in a brilliantly-shining shirt of mail, and with a helmet inlaid with gold, from which fluttered a heron's plume.

But in all that glittering pageant I saw clearly only

one loved face, and the soft blue eyes tenderly smiling towards me.

In a short time even my father's features grew blurred and indistinct. During the next few minutes I was animated by but one desire—to get home first and show these swarthy Asiatics that the Englishman's son was worthy of his sire.

Into that brief space I crowded more real excitement than I have ever experienced since. I felt as if my father's honour depended upon the issue of the race, and I made a firm resolve to win it.

Before long the struggle resolved itself into a contest between a Mohammedan youth, the son of Mahmoud Khan, and myself.

Neck by neck we raced, and I could see my dusky rival's black eyes flash with rage as he vainly urged his steed to a speedier pace.

At length the time came for the last supreme effort. Dropping the reins loosely on the pony's back, I called him by name, and like an arrow from a bow we darted ahead.

Until now there had reigned an almost universal silence, but as my pony shot to the front there rose a mighty acclamation on the air.

My cheeks flushed with pride at the thought of the victory within my grasp, and I was already enjoying in anticipation my father's words of praise, when a second and louder roar burst from the vast concourse.

I half turned my head and grew sick with apprehension. Mahmoud's son, riding in splendid style, was not a foot

behind; in another second he would forge ahead, and I should be beaten.

The blood surged hotly through my veins, and I was seized with a fierce, overmastering ambition to shake my rival off. I called on my gallant little animal for one more effort; but his powers were failing, and young Mahmoud's black was already showing his nose an inch in front.

The sight was maddening, and I lashed my faithful pony with cruel blows, until, smarting with pain, he once more darted ahead and landed me in triumph at the winning-post.

At that moment I would not have changed places with the old Lion of the Punjab himself, who, amidst the plaudits of the crowd, presented me with the prize—a golden arrow, tipped with a gleaming diamond.

Every one except my father praised me; but he remained silent, and I longed for the festivities to be at an end, so that we two might be alone.

At last the maharajah gave the welcome signal: slowly the vast assembly dispersed, and slipping my hand in my father's, I turned in the direction of the city.

I waited some minutes for him to speak, and then with trembling eagerness held the golden arrow before him.

"Look, father," I cried, "is it not pretty?"

He answered my question by another.

"Where is your pony?" he asked.

"Ahmed has taken him home," I replied, and I knew that my cheeks were crimson.

No other words passed between us until the house was reached, and then he led me to the stables, where the gallant little animal stood trembling and exhausted.

My father turned toward me, and there was no kindly smile on his grave face.

"Hold up your arrow, Paul," he said. "Was it worth that—and that?" pointing to the marks of the cruel cuts on the pony's flanks.

I drew back abashed and lowered my head; I was ashamed to look into his eyes.

"Do you understand now why I forbore to praise you?" he asked. "Could I rejoice at the sight of my son's cruelty? Paul, I am grievously disappointed."

That, I think, was the sternest rebuke he ever gave me, and it produced such an impression on my mind that even time has been unable to efface it.

My father was not the only European holding high office at the maharajah's court. There were, more especially, several French soldiers of distinction whose children were about my own age, and these constituted my chief playmates.

But as I grew older the bond between my father and myself became more and more closely knit, and I wished for no society but his.

With him I loved to wander out in the cool of the evening into the crowded city, and never tired of hearing him repeat the histories of the wonderful mosques, with their lofty minarets rising skyward, and their gilded cupolas and domes.

Sometimes during his absence I sauntered forth alone, spending many happy hours in the picturesque bazaars filled with their costly wares of lacquer and silk, resplendent with glittering mirrors and gorgeous shawls and rich carpets of Persian manufacture.

It was a strange life perhaps for an English lad, passing his days in that old-world town, surrounded by people alien in faith and race, but to me there seemed nothing incongruous in the situation.

The natives for the most part treated me with civility and respect, but occasionally I caught a glimpse of scowling faces and heard a muttered curse.

Such an event, however, was of very unusual occurrence, and as I knew little of what transpired at the maharajah's court, it gave me little anxiety.

By degrees, however, the knowledge dawned upon me that my father had many enemies who would willingly work him harm should opportunity arise.

It was about the time when my brain first began to harbour this idea that I overheard a curious remark which afforded me considerable food for reflection.

I was hastening home one evening through the crowded portion of the city, intent upon reaching the house in time to welcome my father. Half-way down one of the narrow, unpaved streets two Hindu priests stood engaged in animated conversation beneath the shadow of an overhanging veranda.

They did not notice me, and as I approached, one of them, stepping out suddenly, came into violent contact

with my shoulder, and was nearly precipitated to the earth.

Recovering himself with an effort, he fired off a volley of oaths and spat viciously upon the ground.

"Peace!" said his companion. "The hour of the cursed Feringhee is not yet come. When the lion is dead the jackal will find it hard to hunt alone."

The incident in itself was trivial enough, but my father, to whom I related it, apparently attached to it a certain significance.

"You are too young fully to understand," he said, "and yet it is right that you should know somewhat of our position here. Some day I will tell you how it happened that I threw in my lot with Runjit Singh, but not now. Many years ago, however, I rendered him an important service, and since that time I have been one of his most trusted counsellors. Such a post, you may be sure, is compassed about with many dangers, and though as yet I have held my own, fortune cannot always smile upon me."

Being young, and not then knowing how much pain may unwittingly be inflicted by a simple question, I naturally inquired why he chose to remain in the midst of such perils.

"Could we not go down to Calcutta and join our own countrymen?" I asked.

As I have written, my father's secret died with him, though from knowledge subsequently acquired I have reason to believe he had been sacrificed by his country for some high political purpose.

However that may be—and it would be idle now to make inquiry—I had never beheld him so strangely and thoroughly moved as he was by my innocent remark.

For a moment I failed to recognize my father in the hard, stern-visaged man who stood before me. But he possessed great powers of self-control, and in a brief space he regained his habitual air of calm.

Only the trembling of his voice could not be entirely subdued as he said hurriedly,—

“No, my boy, I shall never return. With you matters are different, and a time, I trust, may arrive when you will be able to settle down amongst those of your own race. But for me the die has long been cast. I shall end my days in the service of my adopted country.”

Then he resumed more cheerfully,—

“The Hindu’s uncomplimentary epithet was no doubt intended to apply to me. Runjit Singh is the lion; I am the jackal. While the lion lives I am safe; at his death they will endeavour to surround me in the toils, and the maharajah’s courtiers are not famed for their merciful dispositions.”

“But why should the Sikhs hate you?” I ventured. “In what have you offended?”

“They have many reasons,” he answered, “each more than sufficient. In the first place, my religion makes me obnoxious equally to Hindu and Mohammedan. Then I am an Englishman, and they look upon the English as the one bar to their conquest of India. Like our own countrymen, the Sikhs are a conquering people; they have gained

their inheritance by the sword, and they are ever thirsting for fresh conquests. The spread of the British power fills them with unfeigned dismay, and it is only their chief's stern rule which prevents them from pitting their strength against that of their hated adversaries. It is the secret ambition of the Sikh chieftains to drive the English out of the country and make themselves masters of the peninsula. To me they ascribe the principal share in dissuading the maharajah from embarking in such a hopeless enterprise, which could have but one result—the destruction of his kingdom. For this cause alone I am covered with odium ; they cannot or will not see that a rupture with the British nation will cost them their independence."

After this conversation my father took me more into his confidence, and I began to perceive with greater clearness how it might be said that he carried his life in his hand.

Yet, judging from his resolute and unconcerned bearing, none would have suspected him to be menaced by danger ; indeed he always maintained that no harm would happen while the maharajah lived.

The real crisis would come at that potentate's death. Until then, he averred, we had nothing to fear, and for what might occur afterwards he was prepared.

Meanwhile the days passed uneventfully, and I was beginning to forget my apprehensions, when one evening my father announced that he was going on a journey which would entail his absence for nearly a week.

He laughed at my gesture of dismay, and bade me keep a stout heart.

I begged that he would take me with him, but the nature of his errand rendered this impossible.

The ensuing days were intolerably dull and weary. My spirits were strangely depressed, and I was full of gloomy forebodings, which were not diminished by the air of suppressed excitement pervading the city.

At the end of the week, however, my father returned in safety, and then I learned the meaning of the unusual commotion.

Thirty years previously, Shah Soojah, the ruler of Afghanistan, having been deposed from his throne, had sought refuge with the Lion of the Punjab, who first stripped him of his most valuable possessions, including the world-famed Koh-i-noor, and then graciously accorded him permission to take up his residence at Loodiana in a kind of honourable captivity.

Here, as the years rolled away, the royal exile passed his existence. But even in the depth of despair the fallen monarch clung to the one cherished dream of his life—the restoration to his throne. To this end, in spite of all rebuffs, he schemed and plotted and intrigued, until at length it appeared as if his passionate hope was to be realized.

A quarrel had broken out between Dost Mohammed (the Afghan Ameer) and the British, and the latter resolved to restore Shah Soojah by force of arms to his throne.

All this my father told me, and, moreover, that an agreement had been come to by virtue of which the Shah's son was to pass through the Punjab on his way to Cabul.

This was exciting news, and a few days later my heart

thrilled with delight at learning that the maharajah, with his principal officers, was about to visit Ferozepore, in order to meet the British army.

I had long been accustomed to the barbaric splendour and Oriental magnificence of the Sikh warriors, but now I was actually to gaze upon those wondrous soldiers who had carried the British flag to victory in every portion of the globe.

The thought made my eyes sparkle, and brought a burning glow to my cheeks.

"Ah, Paul!" exclaimed my father, laying a hand on my shoulder, "it is easy to see that your heart is English."

I raised my head, and answered with a proud smile,—

"Yes: it is a glorious birthright that none can take from me."

"You are right, boy," he said warmly, and yet with an air of melancholy; "it is a glorious privilege. See to it that you never sully your country's fame."

In my boyish thoughtlessness I hardly noticed how on our arrival at Ferozepore my father became suddenly cold and reserved, concealing his natural gentleness under a proud and haughty demeanour.

Often since then the recollection has been borne in upon me, and I have wondered what painful emotions, what aching memories the sight of that gallant array caused him. Did I, by my unfeigned delight, occasion that noble heart one additional pang of suffering? I trust not.

It would be nearly impossible for my readers to enter

into the feelings of enthusiasm with which the sight of those few thousand men inspired me.

I regarded them with a kind of reverential awe. They were my countrymen, and yet strangers. As I looked upon them my thoughts flew to that dear land which I had never seen, and my heart swelled with pride at the knowledge that I possessed the right to call it "home."

Of the pageants and festivities I retain no distinct impression; and when at length we turned our faces toward Runjit Singh's capital, my sole regret lay in bidding adieu to the stalwart English soldiers.

For a considerable period after our return to Lahore I was thrown very much on my own resources, my father being constantly occupied in the maharajah's service.

I fancy that at this particular time he must have had some unusual difficulty with which to contend. Frequently he appeared harassed and perplexed, though in my presence he endeavoured to assume a cheerful manner, and often assured me that all was well.

On the evening when my slumbers were so unceremoniously disturbed, he had been hurriedly sent for by Runjit Singh; and as he had been away several hours, I was naturally curious to learn what had taken place.

"Paul," he said, after making the door safe, and assuring himself that none of the servants were within hearing, "I have serious tidings. It is necessary that I should instantly depart on a secret mission to Cabul."

I could only stare at him helplessly and echo, "To Cabul!"

“Yes,” he answered; “and as the period of my absence will be indefinite, we must make some arrangements for your welfare.”

I interrupted him eagerly.

“Why should I not accompany you?”

“We have a choice of two evils, and it is hard to say which is the greater,” he replied. “The journey is full of risk and danger, and yet perhaps it is more perilous still to leave you behind.”

“Let me go with you,” I pleaded earnestly; and finally he gave a reluctant assent to my request.

CHAPTER II.

A TOUGH FIGHT.

MY father was a man of prompt action, and as soon as it was definitely settled that I should accompany him, he began to make the necessary preparations for our departure.

He possessed the utmost confidence in the honesty and trustworthiness of the majority of his servants, who were endeared to him by many ties; and yet, in view of the long period which must elapse before our return, it seemed rather undesirable to leave everything entirely in their charge.

In this dilemma the maharajah came to our aid, and solved the difficulty by quartering one of the French officers in the house, and making him responsible for the safety of our property.

The main obstacle thus being overcome, my father proceeded to hold his last interview with the maharajah; and in the cool of the next afternoon we bade farewell to our wondering domestics, and turned our backs—for ever—on the home of my childhood.

Under other circumstances I should doubtless have

experienced a feeling of regret, but the anticipations of pleasure and novelty swallowed up all else.

Fortunately it was the cold season, and therefore the most comfortable for travelling, though indeed from long use I was enabled to bear the fierce heat of the Indian sun almost as well as a genuine Hindu.

I need not linger long over the details of our journey to Peshawur; they were, with one exception, commonplace and uninteresting.

A messenger had been dispatched in advance by the maharajah along the route which we were to pursue, with orders to the different governors to render every assistance within their power to my father, and to treat him with due respect as the representative of their master.

In consequence of this command we met with no difficulty. At each halting-place we were received with demonstrations of good-will, and escorted in honour to the chief's residence, where a sumptuous repast awaited us.

For the most part we travelled on horseback, my father's orders being imperative to push on at all speed, and this the absence of baggage, with the exception of a change or two of clothing, enabled him to do.

From Lahore to the river Jhelum our course lay through a fertile and smiling land, covered with rich, well-cultivated fields, and showing every sign of wealth and prosperity.

After crossing this river, however, the character of the country wholly changed. The fertile meadows and the thriving corn-lands disappeared, giving place to range after range of rocky, unclothed hills, pierced by numerous moun-

tain-streams, the beds of which oftentimes formed the sole passage, and rendered our progress both toilsome and dangerous.

The people, too, differed altogether from their more peaceful brethren of the plains. Like most hill-men they were strong and hardy, while many were of gigantic stature.

Luckily for our safety the maharajah's authority was deeply rooted; and if the resources of these mountaineers were scanty, they entertained us to the best of their ability.

"Sighing for the flesh-pots of Egypt, Paul?" said my father one evening, as I made an involuntary grimace over our meagre fare. "Never mind; to-morrow we shall reach the Indus, where our Sikh friends have a strong fort. But are you sure," he added earnestly, "that the strain is not becoming too great for you? I fear lest you may overtax your strength."

"No!" I answered decisively; "I am strong and well."

"Because," he continued, "I can leave you at Peshawur. General Avitabili, who is in command, will take good care of you."

"Do not let us talk of separation, dear father," I answered appealingly; "I should not have a moment's peace while you were absent."

He placed his hand with a caressing movement on my head.

"You have been a great blessing to me, my son," he said, with a deep sigh. "Perhaps the feeling arises from selfishness, but I do not like to think of our being parted.

It shall be as you wish. We will keep together, but I must not disguise from you that many dangers lie in our path."

"As long as we are not separated I am content," was my answer. "Dangers cannot terrify while you are at my side."

He pressed my hand.

"God's will be done," he said, reverently. "And now we must sleep: we must reach the fort in the morning, before the sun becomes too hot."

Soon after daybreak, having broken our fast, we proceeded on our journey, accompanied by our host of the preceding night, who, gratified by my father's lavish present, proffered his services as a guide.

This was a great boon, inasmuch as, owing to his intimate knowledge of the country, we were enabled to avoid a wide detour, and were thus saved a wearisome march of several miles.

That the fact of having secured this man's friendship would ere long make all the difference between life and death, we of course could not foresee. And yet it so fell out.

We had barely quitted the collection of squalid hovels which constituted the village, when a native came gliding stealthily towards us, and entered into a hurried but subdued conversation with our guide.

Presently the latter turned to my father, and making a low salaam said,—

"Sahib, a great man high in the counsels of his prince

makes many enemies, whose hearts would rejoice at his downfall, and who would lift up their voices in thanksgiving at his death. Is it not so?"

"Your lips are a vehicle for words of wisdom," responded my father; "speak on."

The man hesitated.

"Does the sahib think that the prince would seek the lives of his trusty counsellors?" he asked.

My father must have possessed some inkling of the man's ideas, for he replied promptly,—

"Listen, friend, and let my words sink deep into your heart. There are those who would gladly slay the lion, but fear his fangs; therefore they satisfy their appetite with the blood of an animal less dangerous. The carrion crow battens not on the strong, but on the defenceless."

The man hesitated no longer.

"Sahib," he said, "you have partaken of my salt; the hearts of my people have been made glad by your bounty; and now has it been ordained by Allah that we should make a return for the kindness shown to us."

Speaking a few rapid words in an undertone to his companion, who immediately darted off in the direction of the village, he proceeded to explain the cause of his uneasiness.

At the first streak of dawn, about a dozen horsemen, apparently Sikh irregular cavalry, had passed the village, following the main road to the Indus. Encountering a watchman belonging to the tribe, the leader had drawn

rein and closely questioned him concerning ourselves, with the view of ascertaining if we had gone that way.

The statement that we were still in the village appeared to cause him great satisfaction, and cautioning the hill-man to preserve silence, he rode on.

Happily for us the man had reported the circumstance to his chief, who had promptly taken steps to meet the threatened danger.

"We will travel slowly, in order that my men may come up," the headman concluded; "though it is possible that by taking an unfrequented pass across the hills we may avoid the irregulars altogether."

At the entrance to the defile the guide paused, scanning the rocky heights with an anxious gaze. Presently there appeared a flash of red, and his face brightened. It was the flag of his people, and told of help at hand.

"A pretty place for an ambush," quoth my father, when we had traversed about half the distance; "but probably our enemies, if indeed they should prove enemies, are unacquainted with it."

Just at that spot the path took a sudden bend to the left, and ere I could make reply there came a startling cry of "Kill, kill!" and the sound of shots. My horse, pierced in the neck by a bullet, went down under me; and while disengaging myself from the maddened animal, I caught the glitter of steel above my head.

Had the man struck instantly my fate must have been sealed, since the onslaught had been so abrupt that I was practically defenceless. But even as he held the knife

suspended, my horse, plunging at random, kicked him violently on the leg, and with a cry of pain he lowered his arm.

That moment saved my life. Quick as lightning I drew my sword, and ere he had time to recover himself, struck the weapon from his hand.

At the same instant the cry of "Kill, kill!" was echoed in our rear, and though I dared not turn my head, I knew that we were trapped.

"To the rocks, Paul!" my father shouted; "put your back against the wall." And swinging sharply round, we stood with our backs against the face of the cliff.

The situation was a desperate one, and unless the hill-men came speedily to the rescue we were doomed. The swords of half a dozen Sikh warriors, headed by Mahmoud Khan, were already at our throats, and a fresh contingent was hurrying up.

Mahmoud was a practised swordsman, more skilful even than my father, upon whom he threw himself with savage ferocity.

"Slay the cursed Feringhees," he screamed; "slay, and fear not!"

The gleam of the circling blades was almost incessant. On my left the gigantic native, half naked, and with a stream of blood trickling down his face, wielded his long sword vigorously, while ever and anon he raised his voice in a hoarse shout of "Allah-il-Allah!"

Thanks to my early training, I more than held my own in the fierce *mélée*, and already my sword was red with the

blood of one foe, when a savage cry of joy proclaimed the fact that my father was down.

A loose stone giving way had caused him to stumble, and a quick glance showed me Mahmoud's tall form towering above him.

With a cry of dismay I dashed my antagonist to the ground, and heedless of danger, sprang like a wild cat at the Sikh chieftain. Swiftly he turned, putting himself on guard; but the effort came too late. In that moment I was endowed with a strength more than human, and with one blow I cleft him from head to chin.

So sudden was the fell stroke that he sank without a groan, and his affrighted followers shrank back. But their terror was only momentary. With yells of rage they turned to renew the struggle, and at the same instant the second half of Mahmoud's force reached the spot.

Shoulder to shoulder we stood, waiting for the last rush, dizzy, exhausted, with death staring us in the face, but even now with undaunted spirits.

A brief pause ensued, as if our enemies were gathering strength for the spring; and I can see yet the proud but fond smile on my father's face, as he turned toward me with a motion of farewell.

But our time had not come. Like music to our ears there rose a chant of "Allah-il-Allah!" and down the rocks, leaping from boulder to boulder like sure-footed goats, burst a crowd of stalwart villagers on the astonished Sikhs.

They turned to fly; but flight was impossible. There was no outlet from that rocky gorge.

In vain my father attempted to stop the carnage which followed; the hill-men were like wild beasts that had tasted human blood, and not until every Sikh lay dead on the ground did they stay their hands.

At the end of the pass we found the riderless horses securely tethered, and took the liberty of appropriating two, to compensate us for those that had been killed. The remainder we handed over to the headman, who immediately directed that they should be led to the village.

Of the wound in his head he took no notice, but strode along as if nothing had happened, the only remark he uttered being: "Allah is merciful; my people have gained much booty in a just cause"—which I suspect was not often the case.

"Paul!" said my father presently, "it will be well that you should keep silence concerning the treachery of Mahmoud Khan. I will make a report to the commandant of the fort, so that our friend shall not come to harm; for the rest there is safety in a still tongue." Then leaning toward me he added with pathetic tenderness, "But there is one thing, my boy, which neither of us must ever forget—that you have saved my life;" and my cheeks flushed at his speech.

After that we journeyed on with few further words, for in spite of our victory, my heart was sad at the thought of the poor fellows whose bodies, stripped ere now, would be left to provide food for the loathsome vulture.

At the fort we were welcomed with great warmth; and the commandant, Budokar Khan, one of the maharajah's

best artillery officers, did everything in his power to make us comfortable, entreating that we would stay and rest for a day or two.

This invitation my father was reluctantly compelled to decline, owing to the peremptory nature of his instructions; but we made a halt of several hours—a respite which proved eminently acceptable.

Budokar Khan came of Afghan stock, and from his conversation I gathered that the maharajah's present conduct afforded him little satisfaction.

For Shah Soojah he expressed the utmost contempt, and openly stated his belief that his former subjects would never submit to a reimposition of his rule.

“The Feringhees may place him on the throne,” he said; “but when they withdraw from the country, his life will not be worth an hour's purchase.”

To this statement my father made no reply, being manifestly anxious not to be drawn into an argument, but that same evening he confided to me that the khan had precisely voiced his own sentiments.

“It is a big blunder,” he said, “and one which I greatly fear will produce much evil. These Afghans have many bad qualities—they are treacherous, savage, revengeful, and bloodthirsty. But one virtue they possess in a marked degree—a fierce love of independence. You may deprive the Afghan of everything except liberty, but to the loss of that he will not submit.”

“Then what do you think will happen?” I asked, with interest.

“Exactly that which Budokar prophesied. British bayonets will place Shah Soojah on the throne; the Afghans will sullenly acquiesce, but the instant the troops are withdrawn they will rise and tear him in pieces.”

“How is it that Shah Soojah does not perceive his danger?” I inquired curiously, and the reply somewhat startled me.

“He is not blind to the peril, my boy, but like all of his creed he is a fatalist. Allah is great. What God wills, that will be. It is his destiny to go to Cabul, and that which Allah has foreordained must come to pass.”

From the banks of the Indus to Peshawur the country was wild and gloomy in the extreme, the road lying for a great part through narrow and rugged passes, one of the worst being named the Geedur Gully, which means the Jackal’s Lane, a most appropriate title.

But within sight of the city the scenery changed as if by magic. We did not lose sight of the towering mountains which still surrounded us on all sides; but at their base lay a fair, smiling plain, dotted with tiny villages and orchards and charming mulberry groves.

The city itself was walled and strongly fortified, as indeed it had need to be from its proximity to the wild Khyberees, with whom for many years the Sikhs had been at deadly enmity.

At the principal gate we were stopped by an officer, who, upon hearing my father’s name, volunteered to escort us to the palace of the governor.

The change from the comparative solitude of the last

few days was startling. Everywhere the place teemed with human life and energy. Men of various nations, dressed in every variety of costume, crowded the narrow, dirty streets. Hindu and Moslem, trader and fighting-man, priest and fanatic, jostled each other as they hurried along.

Conversation was being carried on in a score of different languages. Here I heard the soft, melodious Persian tongue, and there the harsh, unmusical Pushtani. Hindustani mingled with Sindhi and Punjabi, and many a dialect with which I was totally unacquainted.

Lending an added interest to the scene, and raising the general clamour, were mild-eyed and pensive but obstinate bullocks; small, sure-footed Afghan camels; shaggy, rough-coated ponies; and a vicious mule or two, screaming, plunging, and clearing a respectable circle by the irregular extensions of their hind legs.

It must be confessed that as we made our way through the motley throng I felt grateful for the escort of the Sikh officer, and kept as closely as possible to my father's side.

The inhabitants regarded us with scowling faces. Some of them even gave vent to muttered threats, and their eyes were directed to our outfit with longing gaze. Had we chanced to meet these gentlemen alone in the dusk of evening, I have but little doubt that our stay at Peshawur would have been prolonged indefinitely.

From a remark uttered by my father it was clear he shared my opinion.

"You have a charming population," he said, with a smile; "life must go smoothly and pleasantly at Peshawur."

The Sikh showed his teeth in a broad grin.

"They are quiet now, sahib," he returned; "General Avitabili has partly cowed them. But they are a desperate set. I would scarcely advise you to promenade the town at night if you value your life. The rascals have strong arms and sharp swords. See, our gibbets bear goodly fruit," and he waved his hand carelessly in the direction of a large open space.

I followed his movement with my eyes, and regretted it instantly. At each corner was erected a huge gibbet, literally groaning beneath the weight of over a dozen half-naked corpses, stark and stiff.

"It is not a pretty spectacle," our guide admitted, apologetically, "but in self-defence the general was compelled to resort to strong measures; the villains were becoming too impudent. Matters had reached such a pass that one could not safely walk the streets even in the daytime."

We picked our way gingerly through the muddy lanes, past mean, one-storied, dingy-looking houses, until we arrived in the quarter of the bazaars, which exhibited evidences of a brisk trade.

The shops were numerous and overflowing with merchandise, collected at a vast expense of toil and labour from the adjacent states.

Here and there I caught a glimpse of splendidly-built mosques; but they bore traces of decay, and appeared as if gradually falling into ruin.

Leaving the narrow alleys, we debouched into the main thoroughfare, a broad street opening out into a wide

circular space, and shortly afterwards our guide stopped before the palace of the governor.

General Avitabili had, I believe, been an officer in the Italian army. He was a slight, spare man, but his firm chin and dark flashing eyes showed a strength of character which was absolutely necessary for a man in his position.

In private life he seemed amiable and anxious to please, and received us with quite a genuine cordiality.

Of business matters he would not hear a word until the next day.

"You have had a rough journey, and must be fatigued," he said. "To-day you shall rest; the morning will be soon enough to talk about your mission."

To this delay my father offered a strenuous opposition; but the general only smiled good-humouredly.

"You protest in vain," he declared. "I do not mean you to depart until you have partaken of my hospitality. By the way, does your baggage follow you?"

My father smiled in his turn.

"No," he responded; "we have been levying contributions *en route*, and you also must suffer from our depredations. I fear that, so far as dress is concerned, we have come to the end of our resources."

The general surveyed our travel-stained garments with a critical air.

"Do not worry," he remarked kindly; "I can relieve your necessities without difficulty."

Hitherto my father had adhered strictly to civilian attire; but the general's supplies being incapable of furnish-

ing anything beyond military apparel, we were compelled to clothe ourselves in the Sikh uniform, which, I may mention in passing, was closely modelled upon that of the British troops.

I felt exceedingly vain of my new uniform, and snatched furtive glances at my military appearance, as reflected by the numerous and costly mirrors which lined the walls of the luxurious room where the general had caused the dinner to be served.

The table was laden with delicacies; and, much to my satisfaction, General Avitabili informed us that we were to be his sole guests.

“My chief officers have been invited to meet you later,” he said, “but I thought you would like to enjoy an hour in private first.”

Coming after the rough fare we had lived upon since quitting the large towns of the Punjab, these savoury viands proved doubly welcome, and I fell to with a keen appetite.

After dinner the servants brought in cups of fragrant coffee, and the general and my father sat and smoked.

Without alluding to the reason for our presence in Peshawur, they talked of the recent events in Afghanistan, and discussed the probable chances of success or defeat which awaited the British forces.

I was struck with the similarity of the general's views to those expressed by the Sikh commander at the Indus.

“Depend upon it, Shah Soojah is going to his death,” he affirmed, without the least hesitation. “When the last British soldier has marched out of Cabul, he will cease to

exist. What do your countrymen expect to gain by bolstering up this puppet-king ? ”

“ It is doubtless intended as a check to Russia. Dost Mohammed is suspected of friendly leanings toward that country, and England cannot afford to stand still while the Russians worm their way into Afghanistan.”

Our host gave vent to a short, dry laugh.

“ They do not know our Pathan friends as well as I do,” he said. “ Russian or Englishman, Persian or Sikh, the Afghan hates all alike. In defence of his country’s freedom he is cruelty itself. Even you English do not value your independence as much as the Afghan.”

After a while the conversation turned upon the state of Runjit Singh’s health, of which my father did not give a very good account, and upon the events which would most likely happen at his death.

“ One thing is certain,” our host remarked with decision, —“ the Sikh kingdom will go to pieces. As far as I can gather, the soldiers are wild to embark in a crusade against the English, and that can end in only one way. Our men can fight bravely enough, but they lack discipline, and that is a fatal bar to any chance of success. But come,” he continued, noticing the look of gravity which overspread my father’s features, “ it is time to adjourn ; we must give our young friend a chance to show off his new uniform.”

At this remark I blushed furiously, the speaker had so accurately divined my secret thoughts ; but recovering from my confusion, I followed our host into the adjoining room,

This was a noble and spacious apartment, sumptuously furnished in the Oriental style. Costly carpets, bordered by richly-flowered mats of silk and cloth of gold, covered the floor; and at one end was erected a broad dais, on which a number of officers and leading merchants were collected in little groups.

The announcement of my father's name created a visible commotion. But whether it excited feelings of friendliness or displeasure I could not determine, so quickly did the features of the assembled guests regain that air of impassive calm so strikingly characteristic of the Oriental.

Presently the door again opened, to admit the nautch girls, without whose presence no Indian reception is ever accounted complete.

The majority of those who now came in were extremely pretty, and magnificently dressed in soft, clinging muslin and gorgeously-coloured satins. Clasped round their arms and ankles were glittering bangles and small golden bells, while their apparel was thick with golden braid.

They were attended by the musicians, one of whom beat the tom-tom, while another performed on an instrument like a fiddle.

As soon as they had taken their places in line facing the dais, the music struck up, and the girls to its accompaniment gracefully advanced and retired, keeping time with a rhythmical movement, and manipulating their flowing veils with the ease and dexterity acquired by long practice.

All this was of course quite familiar to me; I had wit-

nessed many such entertainments, and took little interest in the present one, so that I was honestly glad when, at the end of the second hour, the general gave the signal and brought the performance to an end.

It was with a feeling of relief I closed my eyes that night, knowing that for at least another day we should remain in our present comfortable quarters.

On the dangers which confronted us I did not permit my mind to dwell over long. To the fact that they were many and serious I could not well be blind; yet my heart was comforted by one reflection. Whatever perils were in store for us, my father and I would be together, and I should escape the anxieties and suspense which must of necessity have been my portion had I stayed at Lahore. This thought in itself was a consolation, and made me almost easy in my mind.

Another matter which buoyed me up was the general's light-hearted references to our journey. Had the case been so exceedingly desperate, I argued, his behaviour would have betrayed more seriousness; and with this pleasing but erroneous fancy in my mind I fell asleep.

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE KHYBER'S MOUTH.

AFTER breakfast on the following morning, our host conducted us to a small, octagonal-shaped room, and having drawn the heavy curtains across the portal, exclaimed, "Now we can discuss this business at our ease."

Thinking my presence might prove an obstacle to their freedom of speech, I was withdrawing to the farther end of the apartment, when my father motioned me to remain.

"There is nothing to be concealed, Paul," he observed kindly. "You are already aware of as much of my mission as need be mentioned. My object is to reach Cabul at the earliest opportunity, and the general will give us the benefit of his advice as to the best means of accomplishing it."

I looked with eagerness at the officer's face, and was startled at the alteration in its expression. The carelessness and jollity and mirth had vanished, to be succeeded by a look of intense gravity.

"The question is most difficult to answer," he said, speaking with great deliberation, "and I scarcely like to advise you. By the maharajah's orders I am to place my

troops at your disposal, and that command shall be most willingly obeyed. At the same time, it is only fair to add that without considerable reinforcements you could never force your way even through the Khyber. Stern experience has taught me that it is a death-trap."

My father hastened to assent.

"Force is out of the question," he said. "I should require the Sikh army at my back. Moreover, one condition essential to the success of my errand is secrecy."

Our host breathed more freely.

"In that case," he remarked, "recourse must be had to stratagem. Have you yourself not considered any plan?"

"I know not if there be any practical value in the idea," my father replied, "but it occurred to me that we might pass through the country in the character of merchants. As you are aware, I am a fair linguist."

The general shook his head.

"It is too risky; long before reaching Cabul you would be murdered for the sake of your goods. The temptation would be far too strong for our Afghan friends, especially now that the country is in such an unsettled state."

My father smiled faintly.

"Then we will hear your suggestion for overcoming the impossible," he said.

To my surprise the general exhibited unequivocal signs of emotion.

"In my case," he responded, "I should conquer the impossible by running away from it. My friend, listen to me and take my advice. This enterprise upon which you

are bound is not merely a rash one; it is fatal. Believe me, there does not exist the remotest chance that you will come safely through it. If you value your own life and that of your son, return to the maharajah. Tell him frankly the scheme is not feasible. To proceed is simply making a present of your body to the birds of prey."

At the allusion to myself my father winced, but swiftly recovering his composure, answered,—

"General, let us suppose you had made your plans for a great battle, and that victory depended upon a certain movement, which must of necessity sacrifice the lives of the soldiers making it. What would you say if the officer in command refused to advance, unwilling to face certain death? I am in the position of that officer. My orders are to proceed to Cabul. How can I in honour draw back?"

Our host was evidently vexed at this display of obstinacy, and for a time no word was uttered. Then he said solemnly,—

"If you are bent upon destruction, I cannot help it; only remember I have given you warning."

My father grasped the speaker's hand warmly.

"I thank you," he said; "but at the same time I must do my duty. Now let us treat that matter as settled, and try to devise some plan of action which may at least afford a glimmer of hope."

Again there was silence, broken by the general asking,—

"Can you converse in Pushtoo?"

"Yes; we are familiar with most of the native dialects."

Our host paced the room with contracted brows, his footsteps making no sound on the thick, soft carpets.

"It is a wild scheme," he muttered, "full of danger, but I see no other way."

Then halting abruptly he said aloud,—

"The idea is worse than the proverbial straw at which the drowning man catches, but you shall hear. The Khyberees are all in favour of Dost Mohammed; they detest Shah Soojah, and I doubt if they will ever acknowledge his right to rule over them. Now if you could pass yourselves off as emissaries of the Dost returning from a secret embassy, it is just within the bounds of possibility that you might get through under their protection. I can provide the requisite dress, and supply you with some useful information."

It was, as my father admitted, a desperate undertaking; yet there truly appeared no other way, and in the end he determined to follow the general's advice.

The remainder of the day was passed quietly in the palace of our host, who counselled our keeping as retired as possible, and the night was still young when we sought our cots.

"Sleep well, Paul," my father said; "it may be long before you get another opportunity so favourable." A prophecy only too faithfully fulfilled.

The morning found us early astir, and I proceeded to don with great glee the Afghan dress which the general had provided.

In the folds of the tunic, and so placed as to be ready to my hand, I hid two pistols which I had brought with me from Lahore, while from the crimson sash surrounding my waist hung a broad tulwar, a kind of curved sword, extremely dangerous and effective in the hands of the Afghans.

The general had also placed for our selection several jezails—long Afghan rifles capable of throwing a bullet a tremendous distance and with great precision; but being unaccustomed to their use, we preferred an ordinary rifle, with the manipulation of which we were familiar.

My father secreted about his person a bag of rupees, and he had just finished putting the concluding touches to his appearance when our host entered.

"Allow me to congratulate you," he exclaimed; "the transformation is marvellous. And now if you are ready we will go to breakfast."

Thus far matters were settled, but there yet remained a point of some difficulty to be decided, and this occupied our attention during the meal.

The important question staring us in the face now was how to acquire provisions for our subsistence during the journey. This in itself presented an almost insuperable obstacle, and for my part I altogether failed to perceive in what way it could be surmounted.

General Avitabili readily undertook to supply camels and native servants, but to this course there were obvious objections, one of which alone proved fatal to its adoption. This was the absolute certainty that our attendants would

desert at the end of the first day's march; for our host himself admitted that nothing would induce them to set foot inside the dreaded Khyber Pass.

No difficulty, however, could daunt my father's iron determination. The more hopeless the prospect, the stronger became his will, and I verily believe that, rather than turn back, he would have started alone and on foot. Indeed had trustworthy servants been forthcoming he would not have made use of their services.

He reasoned in this manner:—

“We are all agreed,” he said, “that our success depends upon the good-will of the Khyberees.”

The general smiled.

“That,” he observed, “is about on a par with trusting yourselves to the tender offices of an infuriated tigress.”

“It is not pleasant, truly; nevertheless it is unavoidable, and we must perforce make the best of it. Now as the nettle must be grasped, it is my intention to seize it at once and boldly. You tell me Saled Khan is a man of note amongst the Khyberees, that he is possessed of great influence, and that the tribes are in favour of Dost Mohammed. Now cannot you recognize my design?”

General Avitabili shook his head.

“No,” he replied; “at present I can perceive nothing.”

“Yet you yourself gave birth to the idea. This is what I propose. We will draw upon your supplies for a couple of stout ponies, and as much food as they can comfortably carry. Thus equipped we shall make our way through the Khyber until we meet with a party of the natives,

whom I shall request to conduct us into the presence of Saled Khan. Once with him all danger will be at an end, should your information as to his sympathies with the Dost prove correct."

"Of that," the general responded, "I am assured; but you are over sanguine. In the first place, the rascals will almost certainly shoot you at sight. Still, assuming the possibility of a miracle being worked in your favour, how much better off will you be should the khan hand you over to Dost Mohammed?"

"That," said my father, with a peculiar smile, "must for the present remain a secret, but rest assured I shall have little to fear from Mohammed."

Perceiving that he was not to be turned from his purpose, the general now directed his attention to myself, offering to keep me at Peshawur until such time as my father should return.

Against this arrangement I stubbornly protested. In vain he urged the perils which menaced us; each fresh argument served only to strengthen my purpose. Hitherto I had not clearly recognized the dreadful nature of my father's errand, but with this fresh knowledge I became more than ever resolved not to quit his side. Thanks to his careful training, I was strong, hardy, and inured to fatigue. In physical endurance I was almost his equal, and without undue boasting, I possessed no mean skill in the use of both rifle and pistol.

"For the future," exclaimed the general laughingly, "I shall hold the obstinacy of the mule in light esteem.

However, I have done my best, and nothing remains now, save, as the ancient poet hath it, to 'speed the parting guest!' I will send an escort with you as far as Jumrood, beyond which my authority does not extend."

In a short time everything was in readiness, and we bade our kind-hearted host farewell.

"Good-bye," he said, with a certain gravity. "I heartily wish you success, and shall count the hours until your return."

Ah me! how strange that a few words, perhaps idly spoken, should linger so long in one's memory! Even after this lapse of time, the sweet, musical accents ring in my ears, "until your return."

I look back across the waste of years to that early morning when in the midst of a little troop of Sikh cavalry we rode out from Peshawur. For the moment all my fears were forgotten. The city was still buried in sleep, and scarcely a sound save the hoof-beats of our animals disturbed the silence. As we wended our way along the road, bordered on each side by fruitful plantations, I drank in the keen air with a sense of delight.

Presently, too, the breaking glory of the morning sun lit up the smiling land around us, and tinged the mighty hills with a purple glow. The beauty and the freshness of the scenery enchanted me, and I turned to my father with an exclamation of pleasure.

The officer who rode with us—he was the same whom we had encountered at the Peshawur gate—smiled at my eager demonstration.

"Make the most of it, sahib," he said; "unfortunately it will soon come to an end."

"You are thinking of the terrible pass," I exclaimed inquiringly; "is it really such a wild place?"

The light faded from his eyes.

"Three brothers have I lost within its cursed jaws, sahib," he answered mournfully. "It is the abode of desolation. But you will get a foretaste of its horrors before reaching it."

"At Jumrood?" inquired my father. "That is at its entrance, is it not?"

"Not quite so near," responded the young Sikh; "the pass lies a mile beyond our fort—for your sakes I would it were a thousand."

"Had you your wish our journey would be prolonged so much the farther. I think it well that we should face our greatest danger first."

The young officer looked toward me with a pitying expression; he manifestly placed little faith in our success, and more than once on the way I caught him furtively regarding me with a compassionate glance. But the morning was so fresh, the plain so pleasant, that neither his melancholy looks nor his horrible stories of the Afghans' ferocity affected me, and I bestrode my sturdy pony with a feeling of light-hearted confidence.

My father, too, appeared less grave than had been the case since our entry into Peshawur, and he listened to the Sikh's tales with great interest, questioning him closely

upon any point he thought likely to afford him useful information.

Gradually as we wound our way along at a fairly brisk pace—for we had no baggage to encumber us—the garden-like character of the land began to disappear. Traces of cultivation grew more and more faint; there were no longer prosperous villages dotting the line of march; the fruit-trees became less thick, the vegetation scanty, the herbage thin, and the ground hard and dry.

The heat of the sun now became extremely powerful, and the order to halt was hailed with a murmur of approval by all of us.

As yet we were in no danger, but the young Sikh officer, having a vivid recollection of more than one bloody and unexpected onslaught from the desperate mountaineers, posted his men with as much precaution as if we had been in the midst of a hostile country.

“It looks absurd to take such elaborate measures,” he remarked with a smile, “but I have had a stern and bitter experience as my teacher.”

My father cordially approved his tactics.

“Care is never thrown away, from a military point of view,” he said; “and an officer should not forget that a single mistake on his part may be the means of sacrificing the lives of his men.”

Having given our animals into the soldiers' care, we seated ourselves under the shadow of an overhanging rock, and proceeded to attack the provisions which the general had thoughtfully sent with us.

A clear and sparkling stream of ice-cold water whirled and eddied and dashed along at our feet, offering a delightful means of quenching the burning thirst which the heat of the day provoked.

After the repast my father lit his pipe, and leaning back against the rock smoked tranquilly until at the word of command the soldiers remounted. I think we were all sorry the restful halt had come to an end, but it was essential we should push on apace, in order that we might reach Jumrood while yet the light held.

As our guide had foretold, the second half of the journey was dreary in the extreme. Vegetation that had for some distance past been growing sparse now wholly ceased; one looked in vain for a blade of grass or a living plant. The road was a succession of large, loose boulders, and to right and left we were confronted by the blank, stony faces of the barren mountains.

The Sikh smiled at my looks of dismay.

"You do not find my description too strong," he exclaimed.

I shook my head; no terms could possibly exaggerate the awful desolation of this dreary, stony waste.

"Surely the Khyber itself cannot be worse than this horrid place?" I urged.

"Wait!" he answered oracularly; "some day you may be able to answer your own question."

Meanwhile the soldiers plodded along in silence. It seemed as if the forbidding rocks and the sterile plain had crushed all the life and jollity out of them. They no

longer jested or sang, but moved on stolidly, devoting whatever energy remained to them to guiding their stumbling animals over the uneven road.

At length, to our unspeakable relief, a keen-sighted horseman riding in advance uttered a cry of satisfaction, and drawing rein for a moment he exclaimed,—

“Praise be to God!—the fort.”

We strained our eyes eagerly, and there in the distance loomed into view the huge walled pile, with the maharajah's flag flying proudly from its lofty summit.

Frowning and inhospitable as was its aspect, we heeded not that, for those battlements were to us a haven of refuge, affording safety from our enemies and rest from the wearisome march.

As we approached, the garrison lined the walls, and our leader halting us at some distance, spurred forward alone to deliver his message.

Returning in a short time, he gave the signal to advance, and in the midst of the troops we moved onward to the massive gate, which turned slowly on its hinges to give us admittance.

The commander of the fort was a tall, handsome, black-browed man, who greeted my father with unmistakable cordiality.

“Welcome, Clevely Sahib,” he exclaimed. “We are apt to grow suspicious in this Devil's Nest, but it is ill courtesy to keep you standing here when your looks betoken that you are in sore need of rest and refreshment.”

Handing over our escort to the care of one of his

subordinate officers, he bade us dismount and follow him to his quarters.

"The accommodation is somewhat rude, and the fare meagre," he said, "but what I have is yours."

"Offer no apologies, Bahajee," my father answered; "it is not for the first time I come to partake of your hospitality, though on the last occasion it was in a more favoured spot than Jumrood. Have you forgotten my little son Paul?"

The soldier turned and scrutinized me closely.

"Is this really the young sahib?" he asked. "But yes; his features cannot be mistaken."

"Bahajee and I are old friends, Paul," my father explained in English. "I knew him when your mother was alive. I regard this accidental meeting as an omen of good."

The apartment into which the commandant now ushered us was large and almost bare, the scantiness of furniture giving it a rather desolate appearance. Running along the wall at one end was a couch, upon which we seated ourselves, while a small table was placed in such a position that we could readily reach the refreshment which our host provided.

Bahajee being a Hindu, was precluded from eating with us; but after the remains of the repast were taken away, he joined my father in drinking some wine which the attendant now brought in.

For some time they conversed together on the events which had happened in bygone years, and though I was

too fatigued to understand all that was said, I knew they were dwelling upon pleasant topics.

Presently we were joined by the officer in command of our escort.

"I have come to bid you farewell," he said courteously. "May God attend your steps."

"I thank you for your kind wishes," my father replied; "but surely you do not return to Peshawur this evening."

"No, sahib! but the moment of your departure may find my eyes heavy with sleep, and I should be sorry to recall in the future that we had parted without a friendly farewell."

"Bahajee," exclaimed my father, when, having wished the kindly Sikh good-bye, we were once more alone, "it appears to me that your men are marvellously afraid of these Khyberees."

Bahajee shuddered.

"We do not fear them in the open," he replied, "but in their fastnesses among the mountains they are demons. They are cruel beyond all my experience."

"Is not that because you have viewed them in one light only? They are not likely to exhibit their better qualities to the men who seek to despoil them of their freedom."

The Sikh commander shook his head doubtfully.

"Let us hope that you may be more fortunate," he said. "But the young sahib is weary—he would fain sleep;" and at his direction a servant brought in a mattress and some rugs.

I was in truth tired, and without more ado lay down on

the improvised bed, and fell fast asleep, leaving my seniors to continue their conversation undisturbed.

The day had not broken when my father roused me with the intimation that it was time to prepare for a move, and in the dim light shed by the smoky lamps I hastily arranged my dress.

Bahajee had caused to be set out a substantial meal, and advised us not to stint in our eating, since the fare for many a day to come might prove both meagre and unsavoury.

"Our friend may not be exactly an epicure," my father observed, "but he appears to know the value of good and well-cooked food. Taste this mutton, Paul; it is delicious."

It certainly was good eating, and so was the flesh of a plump fowl, and of another bird the name of which neither of us knew.

Meantime our courteous host had issued orders for the ponies to be held in readiness, and just as we finished breakfast he came to inform us that all was prepared.

We followed him silently into the courtyard, and gazing round at the massive walls, on which the dawn of day was just breaking, I breathed a sigh of regret at the thought of leaving their protection.

This depression of spirits, however, was but momentary. I was young, and therefore hopeful, and my inexperience prevented me from fully realizing the extent of the danger into which we were about to plunge.

At the gate our host bade us farewell.

"God be with you," he said solemnly, "and bring you

safely through the perils which beset your path." To which we answered with a fervent "Amen."

The gate clanged ominously behind us; we were alone on the stony plain; for good or for ill we had deliberately turned our backs on the Jumrood fort.

"We have burned our boats," I said, with an unsteady laugh; "henceforth it will be futile to throw a longing glance backward."

"You speak truly, Paul; this is really the beginning of our adventures. Hitherto our course has been simple—with but one exception, we have been in the midst of generous and devoted friends; for the future we must depend upon ourselves alone. Still there is no actual reason for despondency, and the fact that these savage Khyberees are in favour of Dost Mohammed should count largely toward our safety. If I can but gain speech with this Saled Khan, I by no means despair of our ultimate success."

The road gradually narrowed, until we reached the entrance of the world-famed pass.

Involuntarily we drew rein to gaze in awe at the frowning and precipitous rocks. It was indeed a scene of magnificent but gloomy grandeur. On all sides towered stupendous mountains, surmounted by huge overhanging cliffs, some of which were so delicately poised that it seemed as if a sudden push would bring them crashing to the ground.

And through this rock-hewn girdle of barren precipices wound the narrow path by which alone one could penetrate into the heart of the country.

"It is an impregnable position," my father said shortly ; "with the aid of a few guns an English regiment could hold this defile against the world in arms. The contest would not be a fight, but a massacre." An opinion with which no one who had once beheld the Khyber could disagree.

Ominously as the clang of the Jumrood gate had sounded in my ears, I felt even a greater sinking at heart as my brave little pony made his first step into that dreary gorge.

As yet the morning was cold, but it was not the keen air which sent a shiver through my limbs, and caused my teeth to rattle together like castanets. The awful, eerie loneliness of the place struck a chill into my heart. Outside we were in the light of the breaking day, and it had been within our power to glance back at the broadening plain in our rear. Here the rays of the sun, blocked by the projecting crags overhead, failed to penetrate, and we could see nothing clearly.

In the semi-darkness my imagination ran riot ; had I been alone I should have screamed with excitement. The huge blocks clothed themselves in mystery ; they assumed fantastic shapes ; they seemed imbued with a kind of silent life. All the weird old legends of Hindu mythology rushed into my mind. I could fancy the strange, shapeless, and monstrous shadows to be the forms of some giant sentinels that had stood waiting and watching from the birth of time, and were now gazing with an infinite but silent scorn at the human ants toiling painfully and laboriously at their feet.

A strange overpowering sense of helplessness seized me ; I was crushed by this solemn and colossal grandeur of Nature.

Concerning the savage foes into whose hands we should presently come I felt no fear. How could aught human terrify or oppress the soul already bowed in reverential awe before this marvellous majesty of Nature ?

To any one boasting himself in his physical strength or in the might of his intellect I would say, "Go, place yourself alone in that grim defile ; stand and gaze for a moment at those gigantic monuments of God's handiwork ; and if your vaunting human pride be not stifled within your breast, then indeed are you either more or less than man."

My father, I think, must have experienced something of these sensations, for he spoke no word ; in utter silence we made our way slowly and with much jolting through the cleft.

Here and there at intervals the pass widened for a brief space, and then as suddenly contracted, until it seemed as if the towering walls, forced from opposite directions, must come together with a crash.

Our progress was of course extremely slow and physically discomforting, both to ourselves and the animals, though the latter bore up well, and picked their way with quite marvellous tact and dexterity.

Occasionally we stumbled over a dead camel, with its eyes gouged out and its flesh partially eaten by the loathsome vulture ; and as the light grew stronger, we

perceived in places the bones of some animal picked clean by the same disgusting agency.

We had been travelling perhaps five or six hours, when to our left we caught a glimpse of a massive stone fortress, high above us, and situated on the very summit of a high mountain.

"Fort Ali Musjid," exclaimed my father, with a sigh of relief. "Paul, we have fairly earned a rest."

"That is right welcome hearing," I answered; "I feel considerably shaken."

Following his example, I dismounted and led my pony to where an overhanging cliff cast a grateful shade.

"We had better secure the animals," I suggested, "though I do not think they will be inclined to wander far."

A clear stream ran dancing along at our feet, and its gurgle made delicious music in our ears.

"We will make a frugal meal," my father said, "and then if you care to snatch an hour's sleep I will watch; though there is little fear of our being attacked by surprise."

He handed me a flat wheaten cake and a piece of mutton, which, with the addition of a pannikin of cold water, constituted our not altogether luxurious banquet.

"That fortress appears to be impregnable," I observed during an interval of eating; "I should say a stout garrison would hold it against all comers."

"Yet it has been captured and recaptured on more than one occasion. Many a bloody battle has been fought

between the Sikh and the Khyberee for the possession of Ali Musjid."

"The carnage amongst the besiegers must have been awful. Look at the ascent to the fastness; it is nearly perpendicular."

"That is true; but strong as Ali Musjid undoubtedly is, there exists one fatal flaw in its defence. There is no water within its walls, and the nearest supply is the channel in front of us."

"To reach which under fire would prove a costly experiment."

"Yes; more especially as the Afredees—the particular tribe which inhabits this district—are reckoned to be deadly marksmen. But now I would advise you to lie down; you must learn to husband your strength."

I followed this judicious counsel, but some little time passed before I could sleep.

The novelty of the situation engrossed my attention, and several times I opened my eyes to gaze at the rugged cliffs, the frowning fortress perched aloft like an eagle's nest, and the tortuous defile through which we had forced a passage. My father had lit his pipe, and was pacing to and fro, scanning at intervals with lightning glance every path from which it was possible for a native to advance.

The intense silence and the utter loneliness oppressed me terribly. Beyond the figures of my father and the animals there was not a sign of life. All was sterile and barren and dead. Neither bird nor beast gladdened the

sight with its presence, nor broke the awful stillness by a movement, and indeed it seemed to me as if our own position there, crouched dumbly at the feet of the eternal hills, was weird and unnatural.

But gradually these impressions became blurred and indistinct; I lost my hold on reality, my brain grew confused in a world of shadows, and I sank into a troubled and dream-tossed sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

GUESTS OR PRISONERS?

IN the midst of these uneasy tossings to and fro, I was roused by the sound of my name softly whispered, and looking up I beheld my father bending over me.

"Hist!" he said quietly; "control your features. Betray no trace of agitation; the moment of danger has arrived. Yonder in the pass is a party of Khyberees. They are coming in our direction. Let us go forward to meet them as if unconscious of their presence.—Nay, that would be sheer folly" (for my hand was stealing beneath my tunic); "what could we two do against a tribe? Mount your pony; but remember, at the first sign of hostility on our parts our lives are sacrificed. Let us go forward and act as if we welcomed the meeting. The very audacity of the scheme will ensure its success."

I cannot lay claim to sharing this confidence; but it was now too late for hesitation, and concealing my fear I proceeded to mount.

Meanwhile the dreaded Khyberees were coming nearer, slowly, and with evident caution, as if doubting the nature of their reception.

There were six or seven of them, and they certainly did

look a formidable and savage crew. They were all tall, powerfully-built men, of enormous physical strength, having, for the most part, long black hair and beard, and black flashing eyes.

One of them had for head-gear a kind of cotton night-cap, but the others wore the usual turbans. Their feet were naked, and though large were nicely shaped—a result due to the absence of restraint in the guise of boots. Stretching to immediately below the calf of the leg came a pair of cotton drawers, while over all was thrown a loose smock. From a girdle round the waist hung the terrible-looking tulwar, while slung across the shoulder each man carried a long, heavy rifle.

“If they do not shoot soon,” exclaimed my father, as we ambled along in apparent unconcern, “I believe our ultimate safety is assured.”

Great as was the peril which menaced us, I could not repress a smile at this characteristic speech.

It was most decidedly a novel experience to be waiting in this calm, lackadaisical manner, to find out these rascals’ intentions, especially as the information would probably arrive in the form of a death-dealing bullet.

However, there was no help for it; we could only pursue our course, and hope for the best.

“Do not fidget so with your tunic, Paul,” said my father, quietly; “bear in mind my warning. You could not do any good with those pistols. We cannot reasonably expect to slay all the Afghans between this and Cabul.”

I dropped my hand obediently, and turned toward him with a smile.

"Now," he continued gaily, "I am about to discover them, and it will be advisable that your features should reflect the pleasure which the meeting gives you."

There was a gentle raillery in his voice as he uttered these words, and he shot a swift glance of droll humour in my direction.

Thus far we had deliberately abstained from looking at the approaching natives, who had meanwhile advanced quite close; but now my father, raising his head, became, as it seemed, for the first time aware of their presence.

I cannot well judge of my own acting, but he played his part superbly. His face shone with a glad surprise, and as if eager to make acquaintance with these ill-looking wayfarers, he rode quickly toward them.

"Allah be praised!" he exclaimed in Pushtoo; "we are indeed fortunate. Our pilgrimage has been long and wearisome, but now have we come to a harbour of refuge. My friends, we seek Saled Khan, whose name fills the land as that of a mighty chief. Is it not so?"

"Saled Khan is not a babe," replied one surlily, "and his enemies have before now felt the weight of his arm. But who are ye that require speech with the Khyberee chieftain?"

My father made a pretence of hesitating.

"The vultures are gathering from afar," he said slowly; "they scent the feast that is preparing for them at Cabul. There is a whisper in the country that Dost Mohammed's

friends are cleaning their matchlocks and sharpening their tulwars."

"The Khyberees have need to do neither the one nor the other," replied the native fiercely: "there is no rust on the barrel of his rifle, and the edge of his sword is keen."

My father threw up his hand with a gesture of satisfaction.

"Then truly have my footsteps been guided aright," he cried. "And now, friend, prithee lead me where I may find Saled Khan; I have words of weighty import to deliver, and the time is short. The children of the Khyber will not spend their strength in vain. They have already reaped a golden harvest from the Dost's bounty, and the soil that has grown one crop is not incapable of producing another."

At this allusion to a prospect of booty the men's eyes glistened, and turning to one another they conversed in short, fierce whispers.

My father, perceiving the impression his words had made, resolved to strike a further blow, which I, in my ignorance, deemed impolitic.

"After all," he said, with an assumption of scorn, "it seemeth that the Sikhs were not liars when they affirmed that the Khyberees cared not for Dost Mohammed, but were ready to humble themselves before Soojah-ul-Moolk."

The whispered conference ceased instantly, and every man's hand flew to his knife.

"The gift of speech is a good gift, stranger," said the one who appeared to be the chief; "but with us a hasty tongue needs support from a strong arm. Who is Soojah-

ul-Moolk, that the Khyberees should bow to him? And if any cursed Sikh has said that we are not Mohammed Khan's true followers, he has lied."

"Then in the Prophet's name," exclaimed my father, with assumed heat, "let us waste no further time in bandying useless words. If you value the Dost's friendship, lead me to Saled Khan."

"That is not so simple a matter," remarked another. "Saled is at Khanah, a long day's march from here; and who will compensate us for our trouble?"

"The khan will reward you well; and as for Dost Mohammed, I leave it to you to answer if he has ever recompensed his friends with a niggardly hand."

This speech produced a favourable impression, and after muttering hurriedly together another moment or two, the leader said,—

"Stranger, thou must curb thine impatience yet a little. Our comrade has spoken truly: Saled is at Khanah, and the night draws on apace. To-morrow, or perchance on the following day, we will lead thee to the chief; meanwhile our village lies close at hand, and thither in Allah's name we bid thee welcome."

The others expressed themselves in similar terms, but nevertheless they closed up in such a manner that we were virtually prisoners, without the slightest chance of escape.

They divided themselves into two parties, one of which marched in advance, while the other fell behind, leaving us in the centre.

In a brief space the pass once more contracted, and we entered the narrowest defile which we had yet seen. It was simply a slit between the mountains, which rose up on either hand in a sheer perpendicular height.

When we emerged from this tungee, the headman, instead of proceeding along the widened path, turned off abruptly to the right, scaling the mountain's side by what seemed to be a mere goat-track, where a single slip would have precipitated us over the frowning cliffs and dashed us to atoms.

The Khyberees, however, took no notice of the danger, but walked along carelessly and easily, as if the highroad had been beneath their feet, while the sure-footed ponies sprang from height to height without a mistake.

The descent on the other side was equally hazardous, but we accomplished it in safety, finding ourselves at the bottom in a wide valley. After traversing this for some distance, we once more turned to the right, where the path lay over a succession of barren but comparatively low hills, until just as night began to fall we reached the village—if a cluster of mud hovels and a rude fort could be called by that name.

Our guides or captors—and I strongly suspected the latter term to be the more suitable—advanced to the fort, which was surrounded by a high stone wall, and after a brief parley the gate was opened, and we passed in.

Here all except the leader took their departure, and he with a low salaam bade us welcome.

In the semi-gloom we could scarcely distinguish the

surrounding objects; but at a sign from our host some men came forward with flaming torches, which enabled us to see a little more clearly.

"You will find the accommodation rough," said the Khyberee; "but as Allah wills it so it is. The men will see to the beasts; the baggage had better remain with you.—Seyed," to one of the attendants, "give me your torch, and untie the bundles."

"There is a little corn for the animals," my father suggested; "they have borne us well, and have fairly earned their supper." Then following the Afghan, we crossed the uneven courtyard to the quarters which had been selected for us.

The Khyberee had spoken without exaggeration: the place was a mere mud-built hovel, literally bare.

There was neither fire nor fireplace, and not a single article of furniture of even the most barbarous description. The floor was of mud, and quite bare; while, with the exception of the torch, the only light was that from a primitive lamp, which did little more than send out thick fumes of half-suffocating smoke. But I remembered with thankfulness that at least we had our own food, and the wretchedness of the situation was somewhat relieved by the action of our host, who brought in three or four sheepskins, which served admirably as rugs.

Then with an intimation that we could rest without fear, he went out for the second time, and we were left alone.

By the aid of the miserable light we took out the

provisions, and squatting ourselves on the skins, began to eat in silence.

Twice I left my seat, and crossing stealthily to the door, listened intently, but no sound was to be heard.

On the second occasion I tried the door; it was fastened, and this circumstance did not lessen my gloomy apprehensions.

"We are trapped," I whispered uneasily; "the door has been made secure from the outside."

My father, however, was not affected by these fears.

"It is but a justifiable precaution," he said, speaking in a low tone. "I do not think we shall be molested; their hope of booty will prove our salvation. Nevertheless we need not be lulled into a false sense of security. Can you keep awake for an hour or two?"

"Yes," I answered.

"In that case you shall take the first watch. When I have put out the light, do you carry your skins to the door, so that it cannot be opened without your knowledge. Directly you grow sleepy call me, and I will relieve you."

I did as he directed, and, with one hand grasping my pistol, crouched down in the darkness to wait.

Despite my father's cheerfulness, real or assumed, I felt far from safe, but I resolved that these mountain gentlemen should not have it all their own way, without a stiff fight.

The night, however, passed without incident, and I began to breathe more freely when at break of day our host made his appearance, looking a trifle less surly than on the preceding afternoon.

The stock of food which we had brought from Jumrood was by no means exhausted, so having performed our ablutions in a tank outside the hovel, we ate a hearty breakfast, and expressed our perfect readiness to depart.

The ponies, looking none the worse for the few hours' rest, were brought out; and having replaced our luggage, we mounted, and rode slowly into the village, where we were joined by our friends of the previous day.

How these people managed to exist in this desolate place passed my comprehension. Nothing in the shape of vegetation was to be seen, save here and there a few clusters of mulberry trees, though perhaps on the other side of the houses, and hidden from view, there were patches of half-tilled land.

At the moment, however, I had scant leisure for speculation, as we passed swiftly through the village, and almost immediately began to descend a steep and rugged incline, leading into a stony valley, through which ran a broad stream.

The only mounted member of the escort was the leader, but his followers had little difficulty in keeping up with the animals. They marched along with light, springy step, making their way over the rough boulders with wonderful ease and dexterity, and exhibiting no trace of fatigue even when we made our first halt.

As we advanced, the country became more open, and in the neighbourhood of several villages we passed field after field of partially ripe corn, while numerous beautiful *topes* or wooded hills of mulberry trees were scattered about.

The natives informed us that the fruit of these trees was of considerable importance, being dried and used for food, owing to the inability of these barren regions to produce sufficient corn.

As a matter of fact, the midday meal of our companions consisted principally of this fruit, which, in response to their invitations, I tasted. To my thinking it was very sickly and disagreeable, but the time came when I eagerly availed myself of a handful of dried mulberries, and thought them delicious.

Knowing every foot of the intervening country, the natives avoided the frightful passes which are encountered on the main road, and we met with comparatively few obstacles.

The march, nevertheless, was tiring, and painfully monotonous. In every direction the same scene met the eyes. Range after range of barren hills had to be climbed, and a succession of dreary valleys traversed, with nothing to relieve the monotony save an occasional mud-built village, with its primitive wells, its rude fort, and generally—the one slight, cheering break—its wooded *tope* of mulberry trees.

Still we pressed steadily forward, as even our Afghan friends had no desire to spend the night amongst the sombre mountains.

“Shall we reach Khanah before nightfall?” I asked the man who marched at the head of my pony.

“If Allah wills,” he answered resignedly, and thereupon relapsed into his former stolid silence.

They were not by any means lively companions. Mile after mile they went without speaking, save for an ejaculation of warning or direction when we came to any place of more than usual difficulty.

It had grown dark before we reached Khanah, but I could tell that the village was a much more extensive one than that from which we had come, and the fort was both larger and more stoutly built.

Apparently, Saled Khan was a man of some importance, and once more I was assailed by my former fears as after a prolonged parley we rode into his courtyard.

Suppose, after all, my father had been mistaken in his calculations! It was an ugly thought, and I tried hard to drive it from my mind.

Meanwhile our escort, with the exception of the leader, had betaken themselves to the outbuildings, and presently Saled Khan, attended by half a dozen men bearing torches, appeared.

The light was not sufficient for me to distinguish his features clearly, but I could perceive that he was a tall, stout man, with a fierce, swaggering manner, which did not prepossess me in his favour.

Neither did I like the high-flown language with which, after a few words from our guide, he placed himself and all his belongings at our service. His speech rang false, and jarred upon us, though the actual words were friendly enough.

But I was far too fatigued to do more than listen in a dreamy, half-conscious manner, and when at the end of his

protestations he marched us off to a miserable apartment, similar in every respect to that of our first host, I could barely keep my eyes open.

Whatever design the khan may have meditated, it at least proved no bar to his immediate hospitality, and as far as his limited resources permitted, he endeavoured to make us comfortable.

His attendants were quickly dispatched, one for an armful of skins, another for water in which we might perform our ablutions, while a third soon appeared bearing a quantity of bread and meat.

"The night is late," our entertainer remarked, "and you are weary with travelling. To-morrow we will talk over the matters which have led you to seek the shelter of my roof; meanwhile, may Allah protect you."

"I fear our new friend's honesty is not greatly to be depended upon," exclaimed my father, as the door closed; "but we are safe for the present. The khan will make no move before ascertaining in which direction his own interests lie. But you are worn out, my boy; eat some supper, and lie down."

"Can we trust ourselves to sleep without keeping watch?" I asked drowsily.

"Yes, I think so. You see we are completely at his mercy, and he will take no steps until after hearing what I have to propose."

This statement did not sound particularly reassuring, but I was really too tired for argument, and offered little opposition when my father, having spread one of the

skins, ordered me to lie down, while he covered me carefully with another.

The night passed apparently without unusual incident, but it was plain that I had slept soundly, since on awaking I found with dismay that my father's place was empty.

My first thought was that he had been seized, perhaps killed, and I instinctively felt for the pistols, hidden beneath the coverlet.

They had not been disturbed, but in turning over the skins I made a fresh discovery which filled me with astonishment. The bag in which my father carried his money was pushed between them, and part of its contents had been abstracted.

I was still more puzzled to see, on glancing round, the remains of a meal, as if some one had breakfasted.

"What has happened?" I asked myself anxiously; "what can be the explanation of this strange occurrence?"

I crossed the room and stared into the courtyard; but with the exception of a poor half-starved fowl, that flapped its wings feebly and uttered a dolorous cry, there was no sign of life.

In the midst of this perplexity I caught sight of a figure coming briskly from the farther end of the court, and my heart gave a great bound of relief as I recognized my father, unharmed.

"Good morning, Paul," he said, with a smile; "did my absence frighten you? I hoped to be back before you were awake. But come and get some breakfast; I can

talk while you eat. The khan sent us a hen, which he probably considered a great delicacy. Judging from the creature's toughness, I should be inclined to call her 'The Mother of Nations;' but fortunately you possess sound teeth and excellent digestive faculties."

"Their animals do not seem to run much to fat," I remarked mournfully, with a despairing glance at the scraggy bird.

"You forget the sheeps' tails! By the way, did you pick up the bag? I slipped it between the rugs."

"Yes," I replied, at the same time handing it back. "I could not understand it at all. But I suppose it is safe to conjecture that our distinguished friend will not cut our throats immediately."

"Saled Khan is a great scamp," my father responded, "but his rascality will do us no harm. However, I will tell you about it from the beginning. This morning, while you still slept, our friend of yesterday came to inform me that his men were anxious to return. Taking sufficient money to pay them, I hid the rest, and followed him to Saled's room, where we speedily settled to business. I had little difficulty in satisfying the Khyberees, who departed well pleased with my liberality, and the promise of a further guerdon from Dost Mohammed himself. Then began the really serious part of the performance—the negotiations with Saled. As I have remarked, he is an accomplished scoundrel, but in his anxiety to overreach me he exposed his own hand. In the first place, I discovered that he has not the slightest intention of siding

with Dost Mohammed, but is eager to share in the general scramble which Shah Soojah's return will cause."

"In that case," I exclaimed, gloomily, "we need expect little mercy."

My father smiled.

"There you are wrong," he said; "this double-dealing will prove our salvation. Detecting his duplicity, I encouraged the half-formed plan in his mind, by giving him the idea that we were persons thoroughly in Dost Mohammed's secret counsels, and fully acquainted with his plans."

"Yes?" I said questioningly, for it seemed to me that this was a very effectual method of putting our heads well into the lion's mouth.

"The trick succeeded admirably. So impressed is our astute friend with the notion of our importance, that he will strain every nerve to deliver us over to Shah Soojah, anticipating a splendid present for his pains."

I was still puzzled, and asked how this could benefit us.

"You do not understand," replied my father, "that my sole object is to reach Cabul safely and expeditiously. Anything which furthers that end is in my favour. Now, according to Saled's views, we are worth a heavy ransom, and he is not the man to allow a rich booty to slip easily through his fingers. In his own interests he will guard us zealously, and under his protection we shall pass through the country without trouble or danger. Once at Cabul," with an air of pride, "I shall cast off all disguise, and appear in my rightful character, as the representative of Runjit Singh."

“When does the khan start?”

“As soon as his arrangements are completed; probably not for a day or two. Meanwhile we are virtual prisoners.”

This opinion was abundantly verified a few minutes later, when the khan paid us a visit.

We exchanged furtive glances as in glib language he informed us of the necessity for his absence during the remainder of the day, and that it would be well if until his return we kept ourselves secluded.

He had given orders for our meals to be brought at the proper times, and in order to ensure our safety in case his men became unruly, he would place a guard in front of the apartment.

“All of which means in plain English that he has no intention of our escaping,” my father remarked after Saled’s departure, “because while we are beneath his roof the danger is trivial. Savage and treacherous as the Afghans are, the laws of hospitality are rarely broken by them. They would murder us without scruple on the hill-side, but not while we continue to be their guests. However, these precautions are wholly unnecessary, since I have not the slightest desire to run away.”

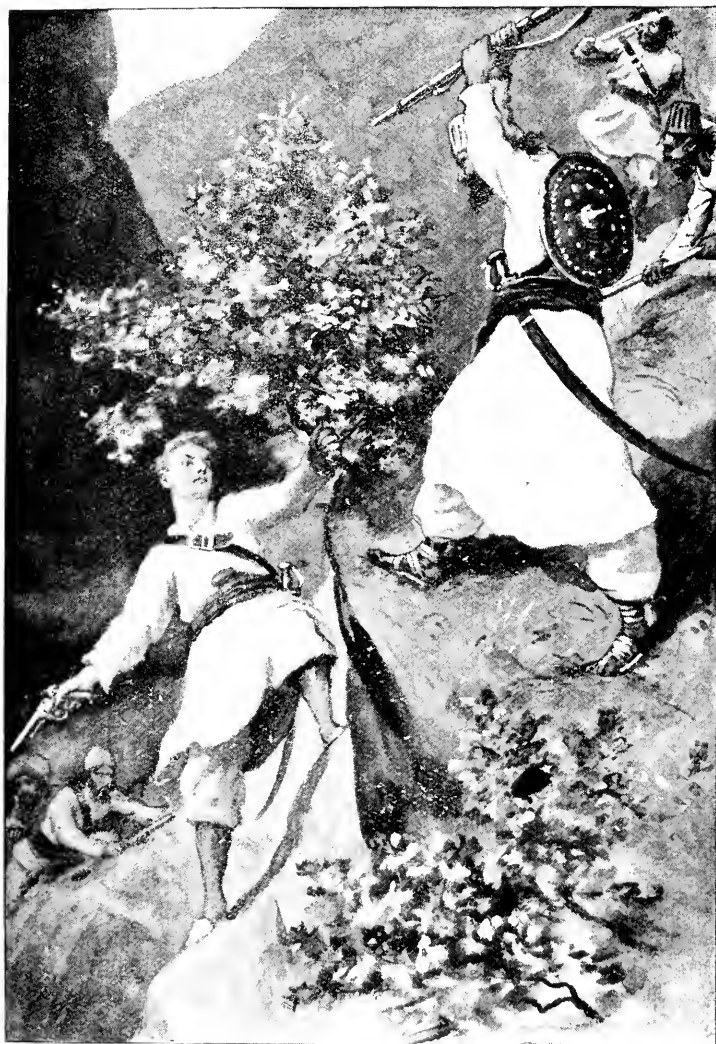
Personally I was not altogether sorry for the delay, as it enabled me to recover more effectually from the fatigues occasioned by the previous day’s march; so finding my father indisposed for further conversation, I wrapped myself up in the skins, and promptly fell asleep.

Apparently the khan encountered some unexpected

difficulty in his preparations, as nearly a week passed before he brought the welcome tidings that we were to set out on the following morning.

All this time we had been inmates of the miserable hovel, only leaving it now and then to sun ourselves in the courtyard, where we were objects of extreme curiosity to the few natives who hung about the place, and we hailed the information of our approaching departure joyfully.

“Even the barren rocks will be a relief after this squalid hole,” my father said, as we lay down to sleep for the last time in the dreary fort; a sentiment which I cordially endorsed.



(579)

I became aware of a tall Afghan standing over me with
uplifted rifle

CHAPTER V.

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH.

IT was a glorious morning when we marched out from the fort, and the breeze which swept down from the hill-tops was most agreeable and invigorating.

The village itself showed signs of active life and movement, as many of the men were to form part of our company.

We constituted rather a motley but not unpicturesque group. In front marched a score of turbaned natives, their white smocks girdled by a broad sash, from which hung the tulwar, while over the shoulder of each man was slung a heavy jezail.

At their head strode a gigantic Afghan of ferocious aspect, carrying a huge standard, blood-red.

We ourselves followed immediately behind the advance-guard, with Saled Khan, mounted on a sturdy *yaboo* or native pony, riding at my father's right hand.

To us succeeded a number of small but hardy camels carrying the needful provisions, and the rear was brought up by a second contingent of foot-soldiers.

During the first part of the march we skirted two or

three villages nestling at the foot of the hills, surrounded by orchards and walled gardens, and with wide stretches of cultivated land, on which were growing heavy and prolific crops of wheat.

Still these signs of fertility were few and far between, and gradually, as the day wore on, the character of the country again changed, presenting us with the old familiar aspects of rugged hill and stony gorge.

From the khan's conversation I gathered that we were approaching the pass locally known as the Choota Khyber or the Little Khyber, which is on the direct road to Jelalabad, and presently we arrived at its mouth.

Hitherto we had been marching in a somewhat loose and irregular formation, but now we closed our ranks, and it seemed to me that the khan bent his gaze anxiously upon the frowning rocks which bordered our path.

What danger he suspected I could not imagine, but he was certainly ill at ease, and urged his men forward as if desirous of extricating himself from the narrow defile.

His followers for the most part shared their chief's uneasiness, and did not conceal their misgivings half so successfully.

"Of what can they be afraid?" I asked my father, softly.

"Some intertribal feud most likely; the tribes are often at strife between themselves."

At this time we had rather altered the order of our march, the khan with my father and myself being in advance.

Half of the defile had been traversed in safety, and Saled's face lost its expression of anxiety, though he did not cease minutely scanning the cliffs on either side of us.

Progress was necessarily somewhat slow, owing to the presence of the laden camels; and chafing at the delay, the leader gave orders that the two weakest should be sacrificed.

This being done we pushed on with greater speed, until, according to Saled Khan's reckoning, there remained only some four hundred yards to the end of the defile.

It was with extreme pleasure I heard this announcement, as my previous experience had taught me how dangerous these mountain traps were, and I made a half turn to congratulate my father on our closeness to the open country.

At that instant, from the rocks on the right hand, there gleamed forth a line of fire, and a score of bullets whistled above our heads.

Immediately our little company was thrown into confusion. That our opponent was both known and feared I recognized from the cry of "Umran Khan! Umran Khan!" which resounded on all sides.

In the midst of the natural hesitation there came another volley from the unseen foe, which killed several camels and injured two men.

To add to the general perplexity, we were now fired at by a party in ambush on the left, and yet we could not perceive a single enemy.

To stand still meant certain death, while retreat was

impossible, and an advance would lead us into the arms of the main body of the attackers.

It was truly an awkward predicament, and we impatiently awaited the chief's decision.

For a brief space he still hesitated, but then jumping to the ground he snatched the flag from the standard-bearer and rushed impetuously forward.

"Dismount, Paul," cried my father; "we shall be safer on foot. It is a great nuisance, but we cannot back out of this fight. We stand a good chance of being killed either way."

As if in confirmation of this opinion, a dozen bullets whistled past our heads and flattened themselves against the opposite rocks.

Without waiting longer we pushed forward with the rest, and as we ran, a score or so of natives, leaving their hiding-places, leaped from rock to rock parallel with us, but paused occasionally to drop a few shots into our midst.

These irregular volleys, however, did little hurt, and a spirited burst soon brought us to the mouth of the gorge.

Here our progress was again checked, and we were most effectually brought to bay.

Right in the path stood a wall of huge stones, hastily constructed, but sufficiently stable to serve as a breastwork for the foe, who lined it with their rifles.

Even to me, who had seen but little of real warfare, it seemed proof against any attack which our small force could launch against it, but there was scant leisure for reckoning up chances.

With a cry of rage, Saled, brandishing his sword, dashed to the onslaught, and we were borne along pell-mell with his men.

Twice we flung ourselves with fierce impetuosity at the wall, and twice were we flung back with heavy loss.

But the very nature of the case prevented us from remaining inactive. The pass in the rear was in possession of our foes; the men were dropping fast beneath the murderous fire; the sole chance of safety lay in a hand-to-hand fight behind that deadly barrier.

For the third time, made mad by despair, we rushed at the wall, and, despite the havoc which the rifles caused, gained a temporary success.

The noise was terrific. The air was filled with curses and shrieks of pain, mingled with appeals to Allah, until suddenly a shout of joy drowned all other sounds, and I saw that Saled Khan had planted his flag on the summit of the wall.

The spectacle excited us all to a pitch of frenzy. Heedless alike of knife and rifle, we clambered after him, and for a moment actually forced the enemy to draw back.

But the brief hope was soon shattered. Even as with painful effort we were making good our footing they returned, led by a tall man, fair as a European and with blue eyes.

The struggle which now ensued was exceptionally fierce, but it lasted not long. There were too few of us who had gained the summit of the wall, and after a desperate

effort we were swept hopelessly backward, our speed being quickened by a shower of bullets.

In the beginning it had seemed rather absurd thus to be involved in a desperate conflict, ignorant of its cause, but as the fight proceeded I had no other feeling than that of a desire to win.

Something of the excitement which seized me at the pony-race possessed me now. I had been hit once in the left arm, but the hurt gave little trouble.

My father had received a slight gash on the lower part of the cheek, from which the blood flowed freely, but he assured me it was not dangerous.

After this final repulse, Saled Khan stood stolidly fronting his foes, making no attempt to shelter himself, and quite heedless of the heavy fire directed against him.

He had made his effort ; Allah had decided against him ; why trouble further ?

But if he were thus careless of life, we at least had no desire to taste of death, and my father, with a sweep of his hand, cried,—

“Why does the Khyberee chief stand like a child, that his enemies may slay him ? Are his men babes at the breast, that they cannot climb ? Let them scale the rocks at the right and take the wall in the rear. Are we sheep to be frightened by the baying of a few dogs ?”

“Allah is merciful !” responded the other ; “His children do not fear death ; but since it is thy wish, let it be so.”

In a few words he told the men of his plan, and then spreading out we began the ascent of the rocks.

“Keep by my side, Paul!” exclaimed my father. “Are your pistols loaded?”

“Yes.”

“You must depend upon them until you gain a decent footing.”

Even had no enemy been present, scaling the cliffs must have proved an arduous task. At places the rocks were nearly perpendicular, and to avoid these we were forced to work our way cautiously along the narrow ledges, pressing our faces closely to the wall.

In addition to these natural perils, Umran Khan's troops waited on the first broad path, ready to hurl us back, crushed and bleeding, into the pass below.

But in spite of all we continued our upward course—my father and I, side by side, panting and toiling in the track of the khan.

Now and again there rang out the sharp report of a rifle, and more than once we were startled by a scream of agony, followed by the sound of a falling body.

At length a loud shout on the left, where the ascent was easier, proclaimed that some of our men had gained the summit, and scarcely had it died away when another yell a few yards to the right told a similar story.

We ourselves were now within a foot of the top, which was fringed by a straggling row of stunted but sturdy holly bushes.

One of these I grasped with my left hand, and was in the very act of springing up, when I became aware of a tall Afghan standing over me with uplifted rifle.

As the weapon descended I swung violently to the left ; but without loosing my hold, and before he could strike again, I took aim, and shot him in the chest. With the name of Allah on his lips he toppled forward, made a wild but futile effort to save himself, and fell headlong over the precipice.

In another moment I was on the path and in the midst of a fighting crowd, amongst whom could easily be distinguished my father and Saled Khan, whose huge flag of blood-red hue served as a gathering-point for his men.

To narrate precisely how I reached them would be beyond my power, but presently we three stood once more shoulder to shoulder, while round us the fight waxed hotter and hotter.

No longer, however, did we fight with a hope of victory, but simply for our lives, and the feeling of despair nerved us with more than human strength.

In spite of overpowering numbers, in spite of weakness caused by previous exertions and numerous wounds, we not only held our own, but foot by foot pushed the enemy back.

I had witnessed my father's prowess when we were so treacherously attacked by Mahmoud Khan, but compared with this our previous adventure had been mere child's play.

He spoke no word, uttered no sound, but the sweep of his sword seemed endless and untiring ; even Saled Khan, doughty warrior as he was, did not inspire such terror as that calm, steadfast Englishman.

Forward, very slowly in truth, but still forward we advanced, and I began to think we might drive them to the end of the path, when a new enemy made his appearance.

The fair Afghan with blue eyes, who had been fighting farther along the ridge, came running up, and with a joyful cry of "Umran!" his men opened their ranks.

At sight of Saled he bounded forward like a tiger on his prey, and reckless of the latter's knife, cut him down at a blow.

Almost at the same time, my father, parrying a fierce thrust, laid himself open to a downward sweep from a second Afghan, and fell covered with blood.

For an instant the sight paralyzed me, but ere the fellow could strike again I was standing over the prostrate body of the parent I loved so well.

After that I know not when the end came. I fought recklessly, heedless of danger, nay, rather courting it, for in the din and turmoil of the strife I had but one thought—my father was dead, and I would fain die also.

I have a faint remembrance of seeing the blue-eyed Afghan gazing into my face, then gradually light and consciousness faded, and I knew no more.

How long the state of insensibility lasted, or what actually occurred, I did not learn for some time; but when my eyes were once more opened to the light of day, I was lying on a bed of skins in a small, bare room.

My head burned, there was a loud buzzing noise in my ears, and when I attempted to shift my position the

pain in my limbs became so acute that I lay back quite exhausted.

In a listless kind of way I noticed that my body was wrapped in various bandages, but the fact did not trouble me at all; I was far too weak to think about the matter.

Toward dusk some one entered the room, and with an untutored yet gentle skill proceeded to change the bandages and moisten my hot brow with a wet rag.

I made no movement, but when the operation was completed murmured, "Thank you."

As in a dream the sound of a voice reached me, and I heard the words in Persian,—

"Now, Allah be praised! This is indeed wonderful; the young sahib must have the strength of a mountain lion."

The speaker disappeared, but returned shortly, bearing some savoury liquid with which he fed me.

Then without further speech he went away, and I slept.

Many days passed like this—days during which I slept, or if awake lay non-observant and lethargic, utterly forgetful of the past, indifferent to the present and the future.

But with returning bodily strength there came renewed activity of mind, and I began faintly to feel a vague sense of want.

One night I lay awake puzzling my poor, confused brain to discover what it was that so sorely perplexed me.

In the silence and the darkness—for there was no lamp—I turned restlessly on one side. Something in the

movement must have recalled those other nights when I had lain with my father's hand in mine.

"Father," I whispered softly, "father."

There was no response, and I repeated the word in a louder key.

Still no answer came, and I stretched out my hand in the darkness, groping vainly for his body.

I could feel nothing; all was blank.

The bitterness of that moment lives with me yet, for in it was stamped on my memory the recollection of the grievous truth.

My father was dead, and I should see his face no more.

It all came back now with vivid distinctness—the trap in the pass, the assault on the barrier, the terrible struggle on the hill-side, and lastly that crowning blow which deprived me for ever of him whom I loved so devotedly.

I did not weep, but as I lay waiting wearily for the coming of dawn it seemed as if my heart must break.

Concerning my personal safety I cared nothing; my father was dead, and losing him I lost all.

But at last the morning came, and when the door was opened to admit my captor, I glanced eagerly across the room.

Hitherto I had taken no notice of him, but now, as he came to the bed, I recognized the fair skin and blue eyes of Umran Khan.

"The young sahib is better," he said, smiling graciously; "Allah has been very merciful."

I looked at him with renewed interest. He used the

Persian language, and his voice was sweet and musical as a woman's. He was tall, even for an Afghan, and stoutly made, and his features were by no means ill-favoured.

"Is the young sahib's heart sad at the loss of the Feringhee whose sword ate up so many of my warriors?" he asked.

"The Feringhee was my father," I answered, moodily; "why am I polluted with the presence of his murderer?"

"Grief has blinded the young sahib's judgment," the khan replied, without a trace of displeasure; "when his heart is open to reason, he will acknowledge that his reproach is without cause. Who can stand against the will of Allah? And why should the young sahib and his father lend their swords to a dog like Saled Khan?—may the jackals pick his bones!"

"The riddle is easily read. We were messengers from the Lion of the Punjab, with a private message for Dost Mohammed's ear. The Khyberree chief promised to lead us to him, and we accepted the offer gladly. In our country the tiger does not bury his fangs in the throat of his mate."

An odd smile flitted across my captor's face.

"The dead Feringhee must have been a bold man to thrust his hand into the serpent's mouth," he remarked, dryly. "Saled Khan was a traitor, bought with Shah Soojah's gold."

"Then you still serve Dost Mohammed?"

He drew himself up proudly to his full height.

"Are the Pushtaneh oxen, that they should require a

driver?" he asked. "Umran Khan acknowledges no one as his master, but he is Dost Mohammed's friend."

"Which accounts for the massacre in the Choota Khyber!"

This appeared to me the natural inference to draw, but I was nevertheless mistaken, as the khan soon showed.

The story to which I now listened cast a lurid light on a phase of Afghan life with which I had previously been unacquainted.

Since then I have been informed that a similar custom at one time prevailed in Southern Europe, where it was known as the *vendetta* or blood-feud.

By this unwritten law it became the bounden duty of a murdered person's nearest relative to slay the murderer.

Amongst the Afghans this practice was held in such high repute that none dared disobey it, and thus it happened that a hasty blow was oftentimes the cause of a series of bloodthirsty murders extending over many generations.

In the present instance the origin of the quarrel between the families of Saled and Umran Khan was lost in antiquity; but when the latter was still a child, his father, who had previously killed Saled's grandsire, was himself slain by the dead man's eldest son.

Thus at the very threshold of life there devolved upon the luckless infant the duty of avenging his father's death. From this task there was no escape, even had the youthful khan so wished it.

This, however, from the nature of his training, was scarcely likely. Every day the story of the assassination

was poured into his wondering ears, and as each year came round, bringing with it its fatal anniversary, the blood-stained sash which had belonged to the dead man was solemnly produced and laid before him.

As it happened, before the child grew to man's estate the murderer died, leaving his son to take his place. About this time, too, there occurred a bitter dispute, apart from the blood-feud, between the tribes, and in this of course Umran had also to bear his share.

Twice he penetrated by stealth into the heart of Saled's stronghold, but on each occasion he was forced to return with his thirst for vengeance unappeased.

Then from a trustworthy source he learned that Saled, in obedience to a secret understanding with Shah Soojah, was preparing for a march to Cabul; and he laid his plans accordingly.

In order to avert suspicion from his real design, he caused it to be whispered abroad that he was hurrying forward to Dost Mohammed's assistance; and knowing that the information would speedily be carried to his intended victim, actually marched his force two stages in the direction of Cabul. Then in the dead of night he broke up his camp, ordering his men to return by twos and threes to the Choota Khyber.

"And what will happen next?" I asked.

"Ah, sahib! who can tell?" was the reply. "When the husbandman puts the seed into the ground, does he know if his eyes will behold the ripening grain? We are all in the hands of Allah."

"But," I urged, "now that Saled is slain, you yourself will be marked out for death."

He assented with an air of total unconcern, as if the matter possessed but scant interest for him personally, and soon afterwards took his leave.

The next few days were spent mainly in brooding over my father's untimely death; but though my grief was still exceedingly bitter, I could but acknowledge the justice of Umran's remark, and admit that he was not to blame.

After the day when he related the story of the vendetta, I saw nothing of him for more than a week, his place being taken by one of the tribesmen, who tended me carefully, and kept me well supplied with nourishing food.

On the morning of the khan's return I was sufficiently recovered to sit up, which my captor affirmed rejoiced his heart to behold.

As yet no mention had been made of my ultimate fate, but I felt convinced that the chief had no intention of putting me to death, and this idea was soon confirmed.

"The sahib must be prepared for ill news," he remarked, seating himself on the skins. "Dost Mohammed is no longer at Cabul. The fox reigns in the lion's stead. Soojah-ul-Moolk sits on the throne of the Pushtaneh, and the Dost has fled to the mountains."

"And the British?" I asked incautiously, my one desire now being to join my countrymen.

The khan's smile was replaced by a glance of suspicion.

"Why does the young sahib's mind dwell upon the Feringhees? Is not his heart Sikh? Is he not charged

with a message from the Lion of the Punjab to the chief of the Pushtaneh ?”

I saw my mistake, and hastened to remedy it. It was necessary that his belief in my mission should not be disturbed; though what the mission was, or whether my father had been sent to Dost Mohammed or Shah Soojah, I did not clearly know.

From his conversation in Saled's fort I inclined to the latter opinion; but it would be dangerous to hesitate now, so I answered boldly,—

“Umran has a strong arm, and his sword is sharp; to him danger is as the breath of life. But even the lion, whose mighty roar strikes terror through the dwellers in the forest, becomes helpless when he stumbles into a pitfall, and he is at the mercy of the hunters. Therefore it is my custom to walk warily, and not with the eyes closed.”

“The sahib's words are as pearls of wisdom; his sagacity is an inspiration from Allah,” he returned. “Yet truly there can be no danger from the Feringhees. Had the sahib strength I would lead him over the hills in safety to the Dost, who hides far away. But,” and he laid a hand lightly on my wounds, “the swords of my men were thirsty, and drank deep. Therefore the sahib shall lie and rest, and I will carry the message to the Pushtaneh chief.”

Now this proposal I had dreaded throughout the interview, since it was the one which, for the best of all reasons, I could not comply with.



(579)

To Dost Mohammed, and to him alone, will I speak
the words (p. 97)

How was it possible to deliver a message which existed only in my imagination ?

Yet something must be done, and that quickly, as nothing excites suspicion in the Oriental mind so easily as hesitation.

I raised my eyes in affected anger.

"Am I a pariah, that I should betray the trust confided to me ?" I asked, haughtily. "Have I not eaten the rajah's salt and broken his bread ? To Dost Mohammed, and to him alone, will I speak the words with which the ruler of the Sikhs has charged me."

I believe that for an instant my life trembled in the balance. The Afghan rose and half drew his sword ; but apparently his second thoughts did not coincide with the first, as his hand dropped to his side, and turning abruptly he quitted the room.

Neither of us knew then, and indeed months passed before I learned a piece of information which in itself would have destroyed all the importance of my fictitious mission.

During our adventurous career in Afghanistan a great change had taken place in the Punjab. The old lion was dead, and already the mighty empire which his sword had carved out was showing signs of weakness and dissolution.

But of these things, as I have stated, we were as yet unaware, and for me perhaps it was as well.

CHAPTER VI.

I RENDER THE BRITISH GOOD SERVICE.

WHATEVER Umran Khan's secret feelings might have been at my brusque refusal to accede to his request, he made no change in his conduct, but continued to treat me with unvarying kindness.

My weakness was still very great; but with the advance of the season I began to recover strength, and was at length able to rise without assistance and walk about the room.

Although I was practically a prisoner, the khan freely accorded me permission to use the courtyard as a promenade, and of this privilege I eagerly availed myself. I was thoroughly weary of the long confinement, and glad to fill my lungs once more with deep draughts of the pure, sweet air, and to bask in the warm sunshine.

From the first I realized that an escape would be well-nigh impossible, nor did I greatly desire to attempt one. A stranger in an unknown land, without money or weapons—for my pistols and sword had been abstracted—I must inevitably be recaptured, or perish from starvation, whereas my present condition was one of comparative safety.

Later on, some opportunity of joining the British army at Cabul would doubtless present itself, and until that time arrived I determined to be patient.

Meanwhile a cursory inspection of my surroundings impressed me with a favourable idea of Umran Khan's importance.

The fort was larger and far more imposing than any I had yet seen. The house consisted of two stories, and there were numerous outhouses and offices used as stables, cow-sheds, granaries, and storehouses for ammunition. The whole place was encircled by a high wall composed of mud and rubble, and defended by jingals, while at the foot of the wall had been cut a wide and deep trench.

To the right and left were high hills not altogether destitute of vegetation; while below stretched a broad and pleasant valley, affording pasture for a large herd of cows.

Directly beneath the fort was an extensive orchard, thickly planted with various trees, amongst which I recognized the mulberry, apple, pear, and plum; while one patch was given up to the cultivation of the ordinary kitchen-garden vegetables, such as the radish, lettuce, and cabbage.

During the season I consumed a quantity of these fruits and vegetables; and often on the khan's return from an expedition, he would bring two or three dallies or baskets of luscious peaches, apricots (which the Afghans call *zer-daloos*), and *gulas* or cherries.

For weeks, indeed, I lived upon little else than ripe fruit, finding it exceedingly cool and refreshing, and a pleasant change from the ordinary food.

As it will perhaps interest my readers to learn the kind of fare with which Umran provided me, I will mention a few of the items, which will serve as a sample.

Breakfast usually consisted of dhall, a kind of pulse formed from the split pea, together with chupatties. These last are round cakes made of ottah—or as it is called in England, pollard—and mixed with water.

The cooking is of an extremely primitive character—the cakes when made being simply set on edge, and placed near a wood fire to dry.

For the evening meal I was generally treated to an unsavoury mess of rice, barley, and mutton, all boiled together in one pot.

In the absence of crockery-ware, the chupatty before being devoured proved a useful substitute for a plate; and knives and forks being unknown luxuries, we were compelled to have recourse to our fingers.

Sometimes we had a dish of rice covered with ghee, a kind of clarified butter, generally rancid and extremely unpleasant. To this dish, however, the Afghans are very partial, especially with the addition of sour curds, which they call dhye.

Now that I was recovering, although somewhat slowly, from the ill effects of the numerous wounds which I had received, every day of captivity became more irksome, and I wished ardently that Umran Khan would make some change, whatever its nature. But for the present at least this was not to be.

One evening, after an absence from the fort of nearly a

week, he came into my room and sat down dejectedly on one of the numdas or coarse felt carpets with which he had caused me to be supplied.

“Why is the chief’s heart heavy?” I asked; “has misfortune overtaken him?”

“Does the sahib count it a matter for rejoicing that the fox has supplanted the lion?” he replied. “Why should my heart be light? Shall my women folk weave garlands and crown themselves with flowers, shall my warriors make merry, because the Pushtaneh have bowed before the hated Feringhees? Is it the time for a man to sing songs when his neck is crushed by the heel of his adversary? Is Umran Khan an ox or camel to be bought and sold?”

His excitement was so great that I kept silence; and when at length I spoke, it was simply to inquire what had happened.

With a torrent of angry words he told me that the English, after establishing Shah Soojah upon the throne, had calmly settled at Cabul, with the apparent intention of governing the country in their own way. Dost Mohammed, hunted from place to place like a beast of prey, and abandoned by almost all his following, had crossed the border into Turkestan.

This last piece of information was particularly annoying, as it effectually shut out all hope of a removal from the fort, at any rate until the defeated ameer returned to the country.

Each succeeding day, too, rendered a prolonged confine-

ment more probable, as the season was fast approaching when locomotion throughout Afghanistan would be almost impracticable.

At length the time arrived when the last vestige of hope fled. The second harvest had been gathered in; the trees, stripped of their luscious fruit, were already bare; the sun's rays had gradually been losing strength, and one morning, on going to the door, I beheld with a sinking heart the silent and incessant downfall of the white snow.

To me the spectacle was weird and wonderful in the extreme, and even the knowledge that this vapoury mantle was the harbinger of a lengthened imprisonment could not detract from the interest with which it inspired me.

The rapidity, too, with which the face of the country altered was startling. In the course of a few days the immediate landmarks which had become so familiar were completely obliterated. The mountain tracks could no longer be seen; the hollows were filled; the placid stream meandering through the valley had now become a swollen and angry torrent, fed by the snow from the hill-sides.

With very little warning also, we were plunged from extreme heat into an icy coldness. The air was so piercingly keen that I shivered, even when crouched by the side of a roaring wood fire and wrapped in a heavy sheep-skin pelisse.

Concerning those winter months I have little to record, save that they were intolerably dull and dreary.

Sometimes the khan, perhaps pitying my loneliness,

invited me to his apartment, where I saw his wife, a tall, finely-made woman, and, unlike the majority of Afghan ladies, fair-complexioned and with light grey eyes.

She wore a black silk dress, loosely made, and of no particular shape. The sleeves and skirt were ornamented with gold and silver coins, from between which one caught here and there the shimmer of precious stones.

Round her throat was clasped a string of gold mohurs, which, spreading out fan fashion, formed a kind of breast-plate, and fell below her waist.

Her hair, which was nearly of a chestnut colour, hung down in numerous small plaits made stiff by the use of some gummy substance. Her cheeks were disfigured by a red pigment, with which stuff she had also covered her hands as high as the wrists. Over her head was thrown the chuddah or veil, which is invariably worn by Afghan dames when indoors.

These visits, however, proved in the highest degree stupid and unentertaining, as the lady rarely spoke, and the khan, who seemed a model husband, devoted all his attention to her.

Perhaps the most pleasant hours were those spent in my room, where, seated by the fire, he would discuss the condition of his country. On these occasions the theme of his conversation never varied; it always began and ended with a vigorous denunciation of the hated Feringhees.

Since my father's death I had been possessed by an intense yearning to join myself to those whom I regarded as my fellow-countrymen; but even so, I could not refrain

at times from sympathizing with the khan, he was so tremendously in earnest.

He loved the gloomy rock-bound land which had given him birth, and it was evident he was prepared to sacrifice both life and fortune in its defence.

The Feringhees, he averred, were interlopers, and had not a shadow of right to justify their interference. Why should they, he asked bitterly, foist upon his country a king for whom no one wished, and drive into exile the prince of their own free choice?

He made no attempt to conceal the designs which were hatching in his brain, but openly boasted that with the advent of spring he would march westward and slay every Feringhee dog he met.

It was with joyous heart that I watched the breaking up of the winter's snows, since every day now hastened the moment of my release from confinement. Indeed, no sooner had the mountain tracks become passable than Umran, taking with him a score of followers, set off for the purpose of collecting news of the outside world.

At the week's end he returned, accompanied by a second chieftain, and preparations were immediately begun for a long march.

The jezails were brought from their resting-places, the long knives carefully rubbed and sharpened, and the store-houses emptied of large quantities of provisions.

Not until the evening of the third day did the khan find time to visit me, and then his stay was of brief duration.

"Sahib," he said, "give praise unto Allah! the desire of thy heart is about to be granted. Ere to-morrow's sun crowns yonder hill, we shall be on our way to meet Dost Mohammed."

To me it appeared extremely doubtful if the interview with the exiled sovereign would be productive of any great amount of pleasure, but I kept the suspicion to myself, and did not undeceive him. It is ill hastening to meet trouble, and I lulled my fears to sleep with the hope that something might yet happen which I could twist to my advantage.

Through fear of exciting distrust, I had hitherto made no reference to my missing weapons; now I said boldly, "When the eagle leaves the nest, his talons are strong and his beak sharp, else might he be overcome by the carrion crow. Is it the khan's wish that I should be a log in his company?"

"The sahib may be young in years, but his glance is keen, and his arm strong with a warrior's strength," he replied. "We have watched him in battle, and know that he has a man's heart. But now he is in the midst of friends, who will be for him both sword and shield."

I waved my hand impatiently. "When the bullets fly and the enemy's knife is at my throat, shall I fold my arms quietly, saying, 'Strike not; I am under Umran Khan's protection?'"

"We shall see," he answered, turning upon his heel; but though his tone was far from reassuring, nevertheless, to my unspeakable satisfaction, he restored the weapons before starting the next morning.

To feel the hilt of the sword beneath my fingers made a new man of me, and the gleam of the pistols peeping from my tunic heartened me exceedingly.

Whilst I remained in Umran's company my safety was assured; but what would happen when it was discovered that I had no secret to divulge to Mohammed, I could not conjecture.

Still to be no longer defenceless was a great point gained, and it was almost with a light heart that I prepared to accompany the expedition.

Umran generously provided me with a stout little pony, although most of his men were on foot; indeed, from beginning to end I received nothing but kindness at his hands.

From the large quantity of provisions and ammunition carried by the mules and Afghan camels—which latter, though much smaller than those of Hindustan, are better adapted to the rocky passes over which we now travelled—I concluded that the march would be a lengthy one.

This supposition was afterwards confirmed by the sight of a few small, round tents, the presence of which indicated that the leaders expected to camp in the open, and had prepared accordingly.

The two chiefs rode in advance, conversing in whispers; but the men talked freely in Pushtoo, and by dint of listening I learned somewhat of the business that was afoot.

It seemed that Dost Mohammed was still in hiding, but a message had come from his son, Akbar, bidding the

tribesmen who still remained loyal to the Dost assemble at a certain point north of Cabul. There the royal exile would join them, and make a bold dash for the recapture of the capital.

After the monotonous confinement in the fort, the march proved an agreeable relief; and in the joy at being once more abroad, I paid little heed to the roughness of the road and the difficulty of travelling.

The prospect of meeting Akbar Khan took off something from the pleasure, but I endeavoured not to dwell too greatly upon the subject.

Nevertheless, when we halted for the night, and I lay down to snatch a few hours' sleep in the pall or small tent which the khan had set apart for my use, I could not refrain from thinking over the danger of my position.

To a certain extent I had gained Umran's protection under false pretences, and very soon now the imposture must be discovered.

Thus far I had succeeded in satisfying Umran, but the same excuses would not hold good when offered to the Dost's son.

From various remarks made by my father, I judged the latter to be a cruel, vindictive man, who, were his suspicions once aroused, would not hesitate to order my instant execution.

My one hope of safety lay in the chance—a slender one at best—that the Dost might reach the rallying-place before his son.

Certainly there existed the alternative of an attempted

escape; but the risks were so great that I put the idea from me.

For several days we marched without any incident worthy of record occurring, except that at one or two points we were joined by other bands, until our original company had swelled into a goodly array.

At the close of the third day the tents were pitched on the outskirts of a fair-sized village, guarded by two strong forts and several round towers.

I was still feeling the effects of my recent illness, and being fatigued by the unusual exertions of the last few days, I wrapped myself in my poshteen or sheepskin pelisse, and lay down.

In a few seconds I should have been fast asleep; but the sound of voices outside the tent roused me, and I stole cautiously to the entrance.

A tall Afghan—one of Umran's men—stood on guard, leaning moodily on his musket, and listening to a companion who had just come up.

Prompted by a strange curiosity, I lay still, straining my ears to catch the purport of the man's speech.

"It is true," he was saying; "Azful stumbled across their camp. Allah be praised! the dogs are delivered into our hands."

To this his companion mumbled some reply, and then I heard, "Yes, a *chupao*," which I knew meant a night-surprise. "The Feringhee dogs will never behold another sunset."

Then the words died away into a whisper; but that

which I had seen and heard was sufficient to banish all thought of sleep from my head.

The fact of my being guarded was in itself enough to arouse suspicion, and, coupled with the stranger's speech, assured me that some special design was in contemplation.

Concerning its nature there could be little doubt. The Afghans had evidently obtained information of the presence of a British force in the neighbourhood, and were making arrangements for a sudden and overwhelming attack.

This much was plain, and my heart fainted at the thought of the cruel fate which awaited my unsuspecting countrymen.

Once again I peered cautiously through the opening, and gazed out on the wide plain dotted with innumerable warriors.

Would it be possible to steal away unperceived, and carry the news of the intended assault to the doomed force ?

Alas ! even were my flight undiscovered, I knew not in which direction to turn, north or south, east or west.

While I lay thus, reluctantly convinced that my half-formed intentions were simple madness, an incident trivial in itself happened which afforded me renewed hope.

A small group of horsemen, conspicuous amongst whom was Umran Khan, rode out from one of the forts and galloped swiftly across the plain, northward.

Instantly the purport of their errand flashed into my mind. They were engaged on a reconnaissance with the

object of ascertaining the exact position of the Feringhee camp, so that they might the more effectually deliver the coming blow.

This, then, was an important point gained, as I now knew the direction which it was needful to take.

Moreover, I concluded that the British could be no great distance away, since there was no sign of movement in our camp, and many of the men were already asleep.

This idea was shortly confirmed by the reappearance of the horsemen, whom I could just distinguish in the gathering darkness as they returned to the fort.

I glanced at my guard ; he was squatted on the ground, dozing.

It would not have proved a matter of much difficulty to bind and gag him ; but as even a single cry would defeat my plans, I resolved upon setting to work in another way.

In addition to my sword I carried a short knife, somewhat like a dagger, and with this, taking care to make no noise, I cut a hole in the rear of the tent, just large enough to worm my body through.

This task safely accomplished, I peeped out, and finding no one in sight, crawled through, leaving my rifle behind, since to carry it would materially retard my progress, which, under the most favourable conditions, must for a time be slow.

Darkness was fast overspreading the plain, and under its friendly shelter I crawled along, past the tents and the groups of sleeping men, eager to reach and pass the confines of the camp.

Once outside the cordon of sentinels I had no doubt that my task would be comparatively easy.

At intervals I glanced toward the fort, but from it no sound proceeded. Presently, I knew, the chiefs would ride out, and that camp, now so still and quiet, would spring into life.

The night air blew keen and piercing, but in the tumult of my mind I did not heed it. To reach my countrymen in time was my one absorbing thought.

Little by little I got away, slowly and with caution, from the crowded part. Gradually the tents became fewer in number, the ground less encumbered, and over these vacant spaces I went as swiftly as I could upon hands and knees, casting myself prone on the earth at each suspicious sound.

Once, groping blindly before me, I pushed my hands against the prostrate body of a sleeping man, who raised himself with a start and stared sleepily into the darkness.

Right at his feet I crouched, holding my breath lest he should detect my presence.

Discovery now meant certain death, and fear caused my heart almost to cease beating. However, with a few muttered words, he lay down again, and resumed his interrupted slumbers.

Then with redoubled caution I crept forward, until the shadowy forms of the sentinels pacing to and fro loomed before me. There was but scant time for consideration. Each moment I expected to hear the rattle of the drums summoning the tribesmen to arms; so steering

for the point which I judged nearest the road, I crawled forward.

Pausing a moment in a little hollow, I could hear distinctly the monotonous tramp of the two nearest sentries, who were approaching each other.

"The night flies," exclaimed one; "is it not time that our knives should be dipped in the Feringhees' blood?"

"Peace, brother!" the other responded; "before the dawn we shall have settled our account with these infidel dogs. Umran Khan leads, and he has a lion's strength, combined with the cunning of a serpent."

Then they separated, and at the sound of their receding footsteps I forsook the shelter of the friendly hollow, dragging my body warily over the uneven ground.

For many yards I crawled, until the figures of the sentinels were no longer visible; then standing erect, I ran at my utmost speed.

Several times a loose boulder brought me to the earth, and more than once I rushed violently against a projecting rock. But the thought of my countrymen's peril nerved me, and heedless of cuts and bruises I kept my way, sustained by the hope of reaching the camp in time to give the alarm.

The strange road, the darkness, and my excited state prevented a nice calculation of distances; but I must have travelled between one and two miles when suddenly the road dipped, and below me, but some distance away from the high ground, I perceived a dark rectangular object, which instinct told me was the British camp.

The exclamation, "Thank God!" still trembled on my lips, when a burly Afghan, gliding from behind a rock, levelled his rifle at my breast.

The moment was a critical one; but afraid lest the report should arouse the sleeping camp, the hill-man hesitated to fire. Divining the cause of his irresolution, and without allowing him time for consideration, I sprang forward.

The weapon slipped to the ground, and the next instant we were locked in each other's arms. The Afghan, who was far the stronger, held me as in a vice, and slowly but surely dragged me to the brow of the declivity.

Vainly I endeavoured to loosen his iron grip. If only I could grasp the short knife at my girdle, I might yet get free; but my strength compared with this man's was that of a child.

I tried to scream for help, but only a gurgling sound rose in my parched throat; my breath grew laboured; the tired muscles of my arms, unequal to the strain imposed upon them, threatened to collapse; I felt that the struggle was virtually ended, when suddenly the tension relaxed, and I saw the shimmer of the Afghan's knife.

The nearness of death gave me fresh energy, and I sent forth a wild shout which echoed and re-echoed on the still air, "The Afghans! the Afghans are upon you!"

Maddened at the cry, the native struck fiercely; but the knife, penetrating my tunic, encountered the hidden pistols, and glided harmlessly off.

Ere the Afghan could recover his balance, his foot

slipped, and still tightly locked in each other's arms, we rolled over and over to the plain below.

At the bottom my antagonist was underneath, but far from beaten; for I had received many nasty knocks in the descent, and my face was covered with blood.

But the much-needed aid was close at hand. In the darkness I could hear the rush of numerous feet, and realized that in a few seconds I should be safe.

The Afghan also recognized his peril, and putting forth a tremendous effort, he flung me from him and bounded away into the gloom.

But his freedom came too late. Ere he could have traversed many yards I heard a deep groan, followed by the sound of a falling body: in his confusion the unhappy man had rushed straight upon the weapons of the advancing picket.

Rising unsteadily to my feet, I repeated the call for help, and was speedily surrounded by a body of soldiers.

"Take me to your leader quickly," I gasped—"do not delay a second; it is a matter of life and death."

"Lead him to the captain, Angus," said a stout, thick-set man, who seemed to be in a position of authority, "while we explore a little farther."

"Here, my lad, take a drink of this," another exclaimed good-naturedly; "it will warm you," and he placed a metal flask to my lips.

Greatly refreshed by a mouthful of the liquid, I followed Angus—a tall, broad-shouldered soldier—across the intervening space.

The dark object which I had seen from the hill proved to be a cafila or caravan, drawn up in the form of a square, with the carts on the outside forming a kind of rough-and-ready barricade.

In front of the first wagon we were met by a man with an iron-grey beard, whom I rightly conjectured to be the captain.

Angus drew himself up and saluted.

"Well, Angus," said the officer pleasantly, yet in a tone of command, "what was the matter?"

"Permit me to speak, sir," I interrupted; "time is precious; the enemy may be upon you at any moment. The Afghans are preparing to chupao your camp. I have just escaped from them in order to give you warning, and at the last minute fell into the hands of one of their watchers."

"Kennedy gave him a taste of cold steel," Angus interposed quietly; "he is not in a condition to afford much information of any kind."

"That's lucky for us.—But tell me, my lad, where these Afghans are."

"About two miles off, near a large village. I should judge they must be seven or eight hundred strong, and led by one of their bravest chiefs. They have already reconnoitred your position."

"Ah! this is a serious matter, which must be attended to at once. But your head is bleeding; are you hurt?"

"Not seriously; this is the effect of our tumble down the hill."

The officer turned to a man standing a little in the background, and said,—

“Moreton, take this brave lad to my tent, and do what you can for him.”

Then with a promise shortly to see me again, he strode off in order to make his arrangements for the expected attack.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGHT AND AFTER.

BY the time the soldier-servant had finished dressing my wounds the captain returned.

"Now, my lad," he said cheerily, "I trust you are feeling more comfortable. By the way, I have not yet learned your name."

"Paul Clevely, sir," I answered.

"Well, Paul, if we live through this, I shall not forget the obligation under which you have laid us. To-morrow, perhaps, you will tell me your history, but for the next hour or two we shall have stern work on hand. I expect you know how to handle a musket."

"Yes, sir," I answered, a little proudly.

"That is right; we shall need every available man.—Moreton, give Mr. Clevely a rifle and ammunition.—Now if you will come with me, I will place you where you can help us most."

He led the way toward the south face of the camp, and I noted with surprise how still and silent everything was. The whole place seemed buried in darkness and sleep, as if no man dreamed aught of danger.

Later I learned how deceptive was this apparent inertness, and how admirably Captain Gurdon had utilized my information to dispose of his troops to the best advantage.

Pausing at the south-eastern angle of the square, he whispered softly, "Lieutenant Brader, I have brought you a recruit—Mr. Clevely, to whom we owe our knowledge of the enemy's design."

"Very glad of his help, sir," came from the darkness.—"Mr. Clevely, if you will place your foot on that wheel, I will help you up—so. That's right. Now we can say with Macbeth, 'At least we'll die with harness on our back!'"

With the lieutenant's aid I clambered quietly into the cart, and the captain, having addressed a few words of caution to his subordinate, moved noiselessly away.

"Your arrival is well-timed, Mr. Clevely," my companion remarked.

'From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night,
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch.'

At what number would you estimate their strength?"

Stifling my surprise at this strange speech, I answered, "About seven or eight hundred. But listen—surely I hear the tramp of feet."

"By Jove, you are right.

'Hang out our banners on the outward walls;
The cry is still, "They come."'

Steady, men; no firing until you get the word. We can't afford to waste a shot."

As yet nothing could be distinguished, but a thrill of excitement ran through our lines. Somewhere upon the hills a jezail was accidentally discharged; a wild cry of "Allah-il-Allah! Kill the Feringhees," was borne on the wind toward us, and we heard the rush of our foes as they bounded madly forward to exterminate the little band which they fondly imagined to be in their power.

Within the camp all as yet was still, but each man lay at his post, with his finger on the trigger of his rifle.

Nearer and nearer the Afghans came, shouting, firing at random, drunk with excitement and hatred.

At some distance from the camp the living torrent, as if in obedience to the word of command, broke up, and swept impetuously round each line of the barricade.

At that time I knew nothing of the ocean except by hearsay, but long afterwards I witnessed a storm at sea, and the spectacle recalled vividly to my mind the remembrance of that night-attack.

Glancing from the ship's deck I saw in the midst of the wild waste of waters a solitary rock, against whose iron-bound sides the angry waves swelled and surged incessantly, only to fall back broken in a froth of whirling spray.

Even so did it happen with our opponents. Like a living wall they swept upon our defences so closely that we could see the fierce glare of their eyes and the shining of their naked swords. My finger trembled on the trigger of the rifle, and it was only by a strong effort I refrained from firing.

Had the suspense lasted a little longer, I must have discharged my weapon; but just at the critical moment the signal was given, and a simultaneous flash from fifty muskets lit up the gloom.

The rush was stayed. Before that leaden storm the enemy's leading men went down, and with a howl of rage the others sullenly withdrew.

But the check was only momentary. Strong in their numbers and encouraged by Umran Khan, whose voice I recognized in the din, the Afghans returned to the attack, and this time a few of the most daring penetrated far enough actually to clutch the muzzles of our guns.

After this second repulse we enjoyed a little breathing-space, during which the men rapidly reloaded.

"Warm work, Mr. Clevely," exclaimed the lieutenant, wiping his face; "the beggars fight well. But," he added, "I think we have taught them a lesson; they are not in a hurry to come back."

As he spoke the Afghans opened fire at long range, and although few of their bullets effected any damage, we were compelled to remain under cover.

Suddenly the firing ceased, and at the same instant there sprang up as if by magic, beneath our very feet, a swarm of white-smocked fanatics. Careless of life if only they could slay a hated Feringhee, these men rushed with shouts of defiance upon certain death. Cradled as I had been amidst a race of fighting men, I had never dreamed of such recklessness and daring bravery.

But the handful of British soldiers fought with a

stubborn and dogged hardihood against which the tribesmen's enthusiasm could not hope to prevail.

All around rose the roar of battle, oaths and curses, cries of pain, the intermittent discharge of firearms, the clash of steel, the sound of falling bodies, and the recoil and rally of the Afghans, like the ebb and flow of an angry tide.

Hitherto we had been fighting in a mist of darkness, but night was now fast giving place to the grey of dawn, and with the broadening light we began to see more clearly how great the peril had been.

Immediately beyond the rough barricade the plain was cumbered with dead and dying Afghans; for so fierce had the struggle been, that the survivors had not found an opportunity to drag away the bodies of the slain.

Many, too, had been killed within the enclosure, and the place was slippery with blood.

Nor had we ourselves escaped scot-free, since the fanatics who penetrated into our lines died hard, causing many grievous wounds with their curved swords.

And even now the struggle was not ended. The last rush had after a desperate conflict been swept back into the mist; but our dream of victory was rudely dispelled.

Out into the belt of grey, headed by the blue-eyed chief mounted on a tall horse, came swiftly and fearlessly a mighty crowd, impetuous and irresistible.

I glanced at the lieutenant. He stood upright in full view of the advancing host, with his sword drawn.

Each one of us in his heart, I think, felt that this was the crisis of our fate, and many a man must have asked himself the question running in my own mind, "Can we keep them out?" But none showed a trace of fear as we braced ourselves for the coming shock.

"Fire!" cried the lieutenant, as steadily as if his men had been practising at targets, and the answering volley rang out.

As before, the front rank went down almost to a man; but the living tide did not slacken. In its course Umran's horse was shot under him; but jumping lightly aside, the chief rushed on, a full spear's length in front of his nearest follower.

Again the angry rifles belched forth a line of fire, doing fearful execution, but impotent to arrest for a moment the progress of that human cataract.

High above all the din rang out the voice of Umran Khan as he cheered his men to the onslaught.

One second's irresolution now and we were lost. Should those frenzied warriors once break through the cordon, they would crush us by sheer force of numbers.

But beneath the bosoms of the men who guarded that frail barrier beat British hearts, in which was no room for fear.

For an instant as the storm burst in its fury we held our breath; then as the Afghans swarmed along the barricade, we gave vent to a loud cheer and dashed upon them.

Emptying my pistols into the midst of the foremost

group, I drew my sword and flung myself into the *mêlée* where the fight raged most fiercely.

For fully a quarter of an hour the issue hung in doubt, so stubbornly did the hill-men fight, and so gallantly were they led.

Twice during that interval had an Afghan knife drunk blood at my expense, and I was growing weak and faint from the wounds, when a half-naked fanatic, whirling his tulwar furiously and uttering horrid cries, flung himself upon me.

My sword dropped to the ground; but as we closed, I drew the dagger from my girdle and thrust it fiercely into his side. With a last effort he struck back viciously; but his arm was unsteady, and he partly missed his aim. As it was, however, I received a nasty cut, and dropped helplessly to the earth.

As I fell there came a wail of grief from the Afghans, followed by a short stern "Hurrah!" from the British soldiers, which told that the last attack had failed.

Lying on the ground half-stunned, and with the Afghan's dead body covering me, I could not tell what it was that had made the natives pause, but I learned afterwards that the cessation of the fight was due to Umran Khan's downfall.

As I myself had witnessed, he had from the very first been the life and soul of the attack. He had urged on his men, hazarding his life freely, spurning all peril, fighting recklessly wherever the danger was greatest; and when at length he went down before Lieutenant Brader's

sword, the Afghans, raising the lifeless body, fell back disheartened.

But concerning all this I at the time knew nothing, and indeed, shortly after the fall, must have sunk into a state of unconsciousness from which I did not recover until after several days.

When my senses returned, I found myself lying in a bed, one of many, in a long rectangular room, and bending over me stood a tall man with serious face but kindly-smiling eyes.

"Well, my lad," he exclaimed genially, "so you are coming back to life after all. I really began to fear that you were slipping away from us," and he placed one hand on my pulse.

From his manner I judged he was a doctor, and it began to dawn upon me slowly that I must be within the British lines—a supposition which proved correct.

"Yes," he said, in answer to my inquiry, feebly expressed, "you are in cantonments at Cabul. But all conversation is forbidden at present; you are still very weak."

"Just one question more," I urged, "after which your orders shall be obeyed. Did we beat the enemy off?"

"Yes; mainly owing to your timely warning, according to Captain Gurdon's report."

"Then the captain is safe!" I exclaimed impulsively.

The doctor laughed good-naturedly.

"You have broken the compact already," he said; "but your mind may be easy concerning the captain. And now I will answer no more questions."

"Thank you," I murmured, and turning round, fell into a sweet, refreshing slumber.

A day or two later Captain Gurdon paid me a visit, and as I was now fast recovering from my injuries, the doctor permitted us to hold quite a long conversation.

Captain Gurdon was exceedingly kind and complimentary.

"It would have caused me genuine grief had your wounds proved fatal," he said, "since every man of my detachment is indebted to you for his life. Had it not been for your plucky escape, we must have been taken by surprise, with the inevitable result of a fearful massacre."

"It makes me glad to know that the warning came in time," I returned.

"But we are indebted to you for more than the warning. My men are loud in their praise of your prowess in the fight, and Lieutenant Brader says that the aid which you rendered was invaluable."

My face flushed with pleasure at these remarks, and I murmured a few words of thanks for the captain's praise.

"But how did it end, sir?" I asked.

"Nothing of importance happened after you were struck down. Just about that time the leader of the Afghans fell, and his men, dispirited by the loss, retreated. By the way, is his name known to you?"

"Yes," hesitatingly. "But I have no wish to be the means of involving him in danger; I owe my life to him."

"You will do him no harm," my companion replied, "even if he be still alive, which I doubt. But anyway he has nothing to fear from us save in open fight, and that danger I fancy he will be only too eager to court. I have rarely seen a man risk his life so rashly."

Reassured by the captain's words, I related what I knew of Umran Khan and his hatred of the English.

"Should he still live," I concluded, "you will find him one of your most determined foes—straightforward and honest, but implacable. He looks upon the British troops as wanton invaders of his country, and to regain its independence he will fight to the bitter end."

The captain stroked his moustache meditatively, and was about to reply when the approach of the doctor checked him.

The two men conversed briefly in a low tone, and then Captain Gurdon turned to me.

"I must go now," he said; "but to-morrow, if your improvement continues, I will come again."

I told him how much his visit would be appreciated, and then, drinking the disagreeable stuff which the doctor gave me, I fell asleep.

Several times after this Captain Gurdon came to the hospital, and during those interviews I related my history, to which he listened with deep attention, interrupting me but rarely.

When the story was finished he said,—

"As a matter of fact you do not know with what message your father was charged."

"No, nor even to which of the Afghan leaders he was sent; the affair was a state secret."

He mused awhile, but presently exclaimed,—

"I presume you have not heard of Runjit Singh's death."

"No!" I answered; "is he dead?"

"Yes; he must have died shortly after you left Lahore."

"In that case, perhaps the message is as well lost."

"That is my opinion, and if you follow my advice, you will mention nothing here concerning it. But there is another matter to be considered. When you are able to travel, do you purpose returning to Lahore?"

I shook my head gloomily, and in my weakened state it was with difficulty I forced back the unmanly tears which rose to my eyes.

Truly my plight was a pitiable one. Bereft of both parents, I was now by the death of Runjit Singh virtually alone in the world, in a strange country, destitute alike of friends and means.

Nor could I look to better my condition in any part of the world. Even had my father lived, a return to the Punjab would have been full of peril; to trust myself there without his aid would be sheer madness.

By this time doubtless his wealth had been seized and parcelled out amongst his inveterate enemies, who would show little mercy toward me. The knife or the rope—one of these would welcome my appearance amongst the Sikh chieftains.

But the captain awaited an answer, and in a few words, rendered husky by grief, I endeavoured to explain my forlorn position.

"Poor lad!" he murmured sympathetically, "it is indeed a hard case. Still you must not imagine yourself to be entirely without friends. You have already gained one in Leigh Gurdon, and another in Frank Brader. Now let us think what is best to be done. A return to the Punjab is, I fear, out of the question, so that we must seek some other solution of the difficulty. Are you anything of a linguist?"

"That is my sole accomplishment. Beyond an acquaintance with various Eastern tongues, I can lay claim to little which is of practical value."

"And these languages," he asked, with an expression of interest, "what are they? Hindostani of course?"

"Yes, that and Persian, with a few dialects, such as Pushtoo."

He interrupted me.

"If you can speak Persian and Pushtoo, we need have little fear for the future. I will see Sir William Macnaghten, the British envoy. He is the most powerful personage here, and I have no doubt that he will be able to find suitable occupation for your talents. An accomplished linguist is invaluable just now."

This was very pleasant to hear, and rescued me from the feeling of despair into which I had begun to fall.

"Now you must hasten to get well," added my kind friend when I had thanked him; "and directly you are

out of the doctor's hands, I will procure you an interview with Sir William."

The day after this I received a visit from Lieutenant Brader, who congratulated me on my recovery.

"I saw the fanatic spring," he said, "and tried to warn you, but the Afghan leader was keeping me fully employed just then. However, we can exclaim with Shakespeare, 'All's well that ends well.'"

"Do you think the chief was killed?" I asked.

The young officer shook his head as if in doubt.

"The blow would have killed an ordinary man, but our Afghan friend seemed to me uncommonly tough. I daresay he will live to work us mischief yet. But I have not yet learned how it happened that you appeared so opportunely in the camp. It was a lucky thing for us."

Remembering Captain Gurdon's warning, I passed lightly over my previous adventures in the country, and related in detail the manner and cause of my escape from the Afghan camp.

"I tell you what it is, Mr. Clevely," my companion remarked after a pause: "I wish for your sake that I had given that chap another dig. You will experience an uncomfortable quarter of an hour should you fall again into his hands."

"Probably you are right," I assented; "but I have not the remotest intention of seeking Umran Khan's hospitality at present."

Brader laughed.

"Are you staying in Cabul?" he asked.

I informed him of his captain's kind offer to use his influence with Sir William Macnaghten on my behalf, and the young soldier assured me that I need not fear the issue.

"Unless the captain had been tolerably sure of his ground, he would not have mentioned the plan," the lieutenant said; "I know him well enough for that. How much longer is Saunders going to keep you in this hole?"

"That depends largely upon the discretion of Mr. Clevely's friends," answered the doctor, who had approached unperceived; "a quality in which I grieve to say they are sadly deficient."

"Easy, doctor," the lieutenant cried; "I was just about to take my departure. But do you order that prescription for all your patients? if so, I think I shall take a spell in hospital myself."

The doctor carried in his hands two magnificent peaches, which he laid upon the bed.

"Eat these, Mr. Clevely," he said, with a humorous twinkle; "they will serve as an antidote to the lieutenant's conversation. Has he recited any of Shakespeare's plays yet?"

"No," I answered, smiling.

"What! he has not given you a single quotation?"

"Well, upon reflection, I must confess that we have had one specimen."

"But only one, doctor," interposed Brader, "a very little one, upon my honour."

"Then has he indeed been merciful," said the doctor,

speaking with assumed gravity ; " but I fear much he waits only until your recovery is complete. He is afraid that in your weak state you might succumb under the infliction."

" 'When he speaks, the air, a chartered libertine, is still,' " quoted Brader. " You remember that other passage, Clevely,—

‘Slander, whose edge is sharper than the sword,
Whose tongue outvenoms. ’

And he went away laughing merrily as Saunders exclaimed,—

“ ‘Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once. ’ ”

" You will find Brader a very nice fellow, but a little eccentric," said the doctor, as I lay idly sucking the delicious fruit. " We laugh at him because of his propensity for dragging Shakespearian quotations into the conversation, and not always with due regard to their fitness, but he is a great favourite. Do you like the peaches ? "

" They are simply delicious," I answered. " I owe you many thanks."

Two or three days after this, I was permitted to get up for a few hours, and then one morning Captain Gurdon took me to the residence of Sir William Macnaghten, the British envoy.

We found that gentleman ready to set out on some affair of business, but he very kindly waited while Captain Gurdon introduced me to his notice and explained the object of our visit.

“You have placed us deeply in your debt, Mr. Clevely, and it behoves us to show that we are not ungrateful,” the envoy remarked. “I understand from Captain Gurdon that you are a good Oriental scholar, and more especially that you have a speaking acquaintance with both Persian and Pushtoo.”

“I can carry on a conversation fairly well in either language, sir.”

“Then there need not be any difficulty in providing you with ample employment. I am busy now, but in the course of a day or two the matter shall be settled to your satisfaction. Meanwhile,” turning to the captain, “perhaps I may leave Mr. Clevely in your charge.”

“Certainly ; I shall be delighted. A short rest will do him no harm ; he is still far from strong.”

“Then for the present I will bid you adieu ; the shah waits for me.”

“And we will go back to cantonments,” said the captain ; “my wife and daughter are eager to bid you welcome.”

Noting my glance of astonishment, he added,—

“You will not lack for society ; most of us have sent for our wives and families from India.”

“Then it is intended that the army shall remain here for a long period ?”

“We know nothing for certain, but rumour states that we are to await the complete pacification of the country, which event will take place somewhere about the time of the Greek Kalends. But here is Brader !—Will you make

one of our company? I am taking Mr. Clevely to my bungalow."

" 'Master, go on, and I will follow thee
To the last gasp of truth and loyalty,' "

responded the young officer.

"Mark, Mr. Clevely," exclaimed the captain, with a smile, "'how use doth breed a habit in a man.'"

" 'Let the galled jade wince ;
Our withers are unwrung,' "

returned the other laughing. "But it has ever been thus. 'Wisdom cries out in the streets, and no man regards it.'"

Thus, with merry conversation and frequent outbursts of laughter, we made our way slowly into the cantonments, and then in the direction of the captain's bungalow.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SNAKE ADVENTURE.

IN order to render subsequent events more clear, it will be as well here to diverge a little from the proper course of the narrative and explain the general situation of the British troops.

The city of Cabul is built on an elevated plain, and surrounded by high hills, with the snow-clad summits of the Hindoo Koosh stretching away in the distance.

Commanding the town is the strong fortress called the Bala Hissar, encircled by a high wall. Immediately in its rear stands a lofty mountain, across which is built a massive wall, the defensive powers of which are still further increased by the erection on it of numerous small towers.

To the north of the city lies a spacious plain, surrounded by walled gardens, high mounds, and native forts, and on this plain the army under the command of the British leader was stationed.

Here at the time of my arrival had been built numerous bungalows, for the most part one-storied houses with thatched roofs, and verandas running all round to protect the inmates from the intense heat of the sun.

It was to one of these houses that Captain Gurdon, half supporting me, as my steps were still rather feeble, led the way.

"Not much luxury, Mr. Clevely," he said, pointing to the rows of buildings, "but a soldier soon becomes accustomed to roughing it."

I smiled in answer to his remark, and the next moment we stopped before one of the bungalows.

"Here we are," he said, "and inside we shall find my wife and daughter."

Mrs. Gurdon, a tall and beautiful but rather delicate-looking lady, bade me welcome; and then the captain introduced me to a young girl, apparently about two years my junior.

"This is my daughter Sara, of whom you have heard me speak," he said; and the girl, with a frank, winning smile, stretched out her hand.

"Papa has so often mentioned your name of late, Mr. Clevely, that I cannot regard you as a stranger, and indeed, seeing how much we owe you, it would be impossible to do so."

My face burned as I made some awkward reply; and noticing my distress, the lieutenant gallantly came to the rescue.

"Have you no word of greeting for me, Miss Gurdon?" he asked; and the girl turned to him laughingly, affording me a chance to recover my composure.

In truth it was only by an effort that I could assume an appearance of ease. Since my mother's death I had never

been brought into contact with one of my own countrywomen, and this young girl formed so attractive a picture that I could hardly take my eyes from her.

Her skin was of exceeding fairness, while her cheeks glowed with the bloom of youth and health. She had sweet blue eyes which reminded me of my father's, though hers were fuller and of a deeper shade. Her hair, which fell over her shoulders in long wavy tresses, was of that lovely auburn colour which touched by the sun's light shines with the brilliancy of pure gold.

I was roused from my pleasing reverie by hearing Mrs. Gurdon say, "So you are to enter into Sir William's service, Mr. Clevely?"

"Yes," I made answer; "an arrangement which is due entirely to Captain Gurdon's kindness."

"And your own abilities," that gentleman remarked.

Lieutenant Brader glanced across at me. "'So wise, so young, they say do ne'er live long,'" he murmured. "My friend, guard thyself; I fear thou art in desperate case."

"Spare me awhile," I said; "my knowledge of Shakespeare is limited, and I shall very likely mix up your effusions with those of the immortal bard."

"'A hit, a very palpable hit,'" exclaimed the captain, laughing.—"Frank, I must retail that at mess."

"He does but minister to my vanity," responded the young man. "He causes me to exclaim with Sir John Falstaff, 'I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men.'"

Presently the two officers, being compelled to take their

departure, left me to the care of the ladies, in whose society I spent a most enjoyable afternoon.

In the evening the captain proposed, if I felt capable of the exertion, that we should stroll round the city ; to which I readily agreed.

I found Cabul, like almost all Eastern towns, extremely disappointing when closely viewed. From a distance it presents a not unimposing appearance, but seen close at hand it resolves itself into the familiar spacious choke or market-place, the bazaars, and a network of extremely narrow lanes, whose principal characteristic is dirt.

The two chief bazaars were crowded with brightly-coloured goods brought from many lands. There were stores of Persian carpets, gorgeous shawls, and gay embroidered mats. Some booths were devoted to china ornaments ; others to gold and silver bangles, earrings, and bracelets ; but those which most strongly attracted my attention were the fruit-stalls piled with apples, pears, plums, mulberries and cherries, grapes, peaches, apricots, velvet-skinned nectarines—in brief, almost every fruit that could tempt the appetite.

The people, too, formed a motley group, and presented a spectacle which appealed vividly to the imagination. The Afghans, for the most part dark-skinned and black-eyed, stalked along with scowling faces—proud, haughty, and imperious in bearing.

The Kuzilbashees, or people of Persian extraction residing in the Kuzilbash quarter of the city, with fairer complexions and more pleasing looks, mingled in the crowd, affording a vivid contrast with the swarthy, light-framed Hindus.

Here and there idly lounged a group of Sikh soldiers, whom I sedulously avoided, or a little knot of sepoys, while most prominent of all were the British troops, whose very air betokened a proud sense of superiority to the people among whom they moved.

Passing the stupendous pile of the Bala Hissar on our return, I could not resist putting a question which had occasioned me some perplexity.

“Would you not have been safer and more comfortable there than in cantonments?” I asked.

An odd smile passed over the captain’s features as he replied: “The shah has a couple of his own regiments stationed there, and he strongly objects to its use by our men. But I do not think we need apprehend any danger. The Afghans would hardly venture an attack upon an English army, save amongst their mountain defiles.”

This answer of course precluded further argument, and I did not refer again to the subject.

My intimacy with the Gurdon family marked the beginning of a very happy period in my life. Save for the memory of my father’s death, I had no cause for grief. Had I been older, the loss of his property would perhaps have troubled me; but I was young and strong, and having an assured position—for Sir William had faithfully redeemed his promise—I could afford to regard the future with a calm mind.

In order to carry out the duties assigned to me, which were partly secretarial and partly those of an interpreter, I was compelled to reside in the city; but this did not prevent

me from seeing a great deal of my new friends, whom I visited nearly every day.

With the adaptability to circumstances which I have learned to regard as a marked feature of the British character, the soldiers had already settled down cheerfully in their fresh surroundings.

Oftentimes in the morning, when leisure permitted, I would accompany Mrs. Gurdon and Sara in a breezy canter on the Cabul plain. Occasionally the captain and Lieutenant Brader joined us, and then we formed a merry party.

In the evening we would mingle with the throng around the band-stand, to hear the music and while away an hour or two in pleasant conversation.

One day an incident occurred which cemented still more closely the friendship which was fast growing up between the Gurdons and myself.

A party of us had gathered just outside the cantonments round a wandering snake-charmer, who was about to exhibit the accomplishments of his dangerous pets.

I had often witnessed a similar spectacle in the Punjab, and took little interest in the proceedings; but for Sara the sight possessed the charm of novelty, and she looked on with delight.

As is usual, the man carried his pets in specially-prepared baskets, and had a temporary stand erected upon which they might go through their performances.

From the first receptacle he produced a magnificent specimen of the viper kind. The reptile must have measured nearly five feet in length. In colour it was ashen

grey irregularly marked with black blotches, and its belly was of a deep copper red.

Seizing the venomous animal, the man dexterously slipped his fingers along the body, grasping it in such a manner that the viper had not the power to turn its head. Thus he held it exposed fully to our view.

"Is it really poisonous, or have its fangs been extracted?" Sara asked.

Addressing the performer in Hindostani, I told him what was required, and at a sign from him his attendant produced a live fowl, which he placed upon the rough table. With a swift jerk the venomous snake inserted its fangs in the leg of the hapless bird, and instantly the affected part began to swell and turn a deep black. In another second the fowl became dizzy, and spinning round and round like a teetotum, rolled to the ground dead.

A shudder thrilled the company, and it was not until the viper was safely replaced that the onlookers began to breathe freely again.

From the other baskets the man now drew forth half a dozen cobras or hooded snakes.

"How very beautifully they are marked!" Mrs. Gurdon observed.

"Yes," I replied; "but do not forget that their beauty is equalled by their deadliness, though with regard to these particular specimens, I fancy the poison-fangs have long since been taken out."

"Notice their hoods," Sara remarked; "the snakes appear to contract or enlarge them at pleasure."

"That is so. And see also the greenish-yellow mark in the centre of the hood."

"For all the world like the rim of a pair of spectacles. I presume that is why the cobra di capello is called the spectacle snake," said the elder lady.

"It is most decidedly a capital imitation," assented her daughter. "But what is their proprietor about to do now? I trust there will be no more fowl-killing."

"No; the performance is harmless enough, and vastly entertaining into the bargain. If you have never seen an exhibition of dancing snakes, I venture to predict that you will be extremely interested."

The attendant now stepped forward with a musical instrument fashioned somewhat like a flute, and began to play.

The effect upon the cobras was electrical. Each head was turned eagerly in the direction whence the sound proceeded, and after the first few notes the reptiles began to mark time with the greatest accuracy by a motion of the head.

Their keen appreciation of the music was patent, and presently they began to raise their bodies with a slow symmetrical movement, until they were lifted quite a half-length from the table, balancing themselves in an erect position, with the hood fully extended.

While in this posture, they kept their bodies swaying with the sound of the music in graceful, elegant curves, like the billowy lines of a swan's neck.

As long as the performer continued playing, the cobras

kept up their undulating evolutions; but with the cessation of the sounds their movements became slower and more feeble, until at length the hoods contracted, the heads drooped, and the vipers lay curled up, still and motionless.

For a moment I stood admiring the dexterity with which the Hindu picked them up one by one and transferred them to the baskets.

Judging by the careful manner in which he handled them, I had just come to the conclusion that their deadly fangs had not been removed, when one of the spectators laughed loudly at some jest made by his companion.

Irritated by the sound, the nearest cobra lifted its head, and extending its hood, raised itself erect in a position to strike.

At my right hand, and exactly opposite the venomous reptile, stood Sara, unconscious of danger, and wholly absorbed in watching the Hindu.

The blood ran cold in my veins as I realized the peril in which she was placed. I carried no weapon, not even a stick; but on the other hand, unlike the majority of the people, I was not wholly unaccustomed to handling these creatures.

That the risk was a tremendous one none knew better than myself, but it was no time to balance chances. I might succeed, and even if I failed, the attempt would save the beautiful, unsuspecting girl from a cruel death.

It takes a considerable time to chronicle these thoughts, but barely a fraction of a second passed between the moment of danger and my desperate endeavour to avert it.

Swift as a flash of light, and before any one could realize the nature of the action, I grasped the creature's body, slipping my fingers rapidly along until I held it, striving in impotent fury to turn its head.

Luckily the Hindu did not lose his presence of mind, but promptly opened the receptacle, into which I thrust the writhing cobra; the lid was hastily jammed down, and the danger over.

"The sahib is a brave man," said the snake-charmer slowly, "and has moreover acquired wisdom."

"Could the thing hurt?" I asked.

The man made a significant gesture. "The sahib is young," he answered, "but never again until he is gathered to his fathers will he stand so near death." His words made the suspicion in my mind a certainty: the reptile had not been deprived of its fangs.

So rapidly had the transaction passed that very few of the bystanders were exactly aware of what had happened, but amongst the few were Mrs. Gurdon and her daughter.

"Mr. Clevely!" exclaimed the former earnestly, "how can I adequately thank you? I am already indebted to you for my husband's life, and now your generous courage has saved this dear girl from a horrible death."

"Let us get away from here," I said; "allow me to see you home. Miss Gurdon is agitated;" and turning to her, I whispered, "Will you not lean upon my arm?"

The gentle girl raised her eyes to my face, and I perceived that she was struggling bravely to control her emotion.

"I cannot thank you properly now," she said in low

tones, "but be assured that I shall never, never forget what you have done for me this day."

The crowd fell back on both sides, forming a lane for us to pass through; and a cavalry officer raised a cheer, which was quickly taken up and passed along from man to man.

The blood mounted into my cheeks as in the intervals of cheering snatches of conversation reached us.

"Who is he?" asked one; "he has plenty of pluck anyway. Is he English? I do not know his face."

"Yes; he is on the envoy's staff. His name is Clevely. Quite a romantic story. He saved a detachment of the 13th from being massacred not long ago."

"The girl must have been killed. Gurdon's daughter, you know."

I will not be so foolish as to pretend that these and similar encomiums did not flatter my vanity. In truth I felt honestly proud, but mingled with this feeling was a still stronger one—a deep sense of happiness at having preserved my fair companion from harm.

Scarcely had we entered the bungalow when Captain Gurdon rushed in, breathless with excitement. He wrung my hand fervently, thanking me again and again. "The cantonments are ringing with the story," he said; "every one is talking about your cool bravery. It would be a simple matter to overwhelm you with praise, but how could even a torrent of words enable you to understand the gratitude which swells in my heart?"

"There is no need for thanks," I answered, a little sadly; "by giving me your friendship you more than compensate



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Irritated by the sound, the nearest cobra lifted its head

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for anything I may have done. Consider what my life must have been had you not admitted me into your household. Bereaved of my parents, destitute and helpless in a strange land, an alien amongst those even of my own race and faith, from what misery have you not saved me? No, Captain Gurdon, believe me, if we begin to reckon up benefits, it is I who am your debtor."

When I went away that afternoon, Sara pressed my hand warmly. "Farewell, Paul," she whispered with a shy smile, "for the present. You will run over in the morning, will you not?"

"If Sir William does not need me, I will come immediately after breakfast, and we will have a canter over the plain."

As Sara's father stated, the incident had given rise to much comment, and I was compelled to stop repeatedly on the way home in order to receive the congratulations of my acquaintances.

About this time the quietude we were enjoying was disturbed by a rumour that Dost Mohammed had effected his escape from Bokhara. A native runner brought word that he had reached Khooloom, a district west of the Hindoo Koosh, in charge of his brother Jubbar Khan, and that he was preparing to advance upon the village of Bamian.

On receipt of this intelligence, Sir William despatched Colonel Dennie with two guns and eight hundred men, and that officer soon dispersed the levies of the royal outlaw, who barely escaped with his life.

The trouble, however, was not yet at an end. Very soon news came that the Dost was making a determined effort to stir up a rising in the Kohistan, a district north of Cabul, and it began to be whispered that, unless the revolt were speedily crushed, we should have serious fighting in Cabul itself.

For several successive days I could not find time to visit my friends in the cantonments, and when at length I did get there, it was to discover that the captain had received orders to join the force which Sir Robert Sale was leading into the Kohistan.

"Not much danger to be feared," he said, "but no end of wearisome marching and counter-marching, with the pleasing knowledge that our efforts are almost certain to be futile."

"Does Lieutenant Brader go with you?"

"Yes: the order has made him quite lively; he has done nothing but quote Shakespeare since the command arrived."

"Come and cheer the ladies when you have a chance, Paul," the captain added (they all called me Paul quite naturally now, and I cannot express the happiness which that one simple fact occasioned me); "if they are left to their own society, they will be imagining all sorts of gloomy catastrophes."

This I cheerfully promised, and during the next week or two all my leisure was devoted to Mrs. Gurdon and Sara, to whom I conveyed the information which could be picked up in the city.

This amounted to very little, the captain's forecast being verified to the letter. To and fro the Afghans led the weary soldiers through the Kohistan, occasionally making a night-attack, after which, dispersing rapidly, they would betake themselves to their mountain fastnesses.

One evening early in November, on my way to the cantonments, I was struck by the excitement visible amongst the Cabulese. The shopkeepers were restless and perturbed; the Afghans, clustered in little groups, were conversing in a high key, and pointing every now and then in the direction of the British lines.

Meeting a chief with whom I had come to be on somewhat friendly terms, I questioned him as to the cause of the agitation.

"Have you not heard, sahib, that the lion is caged?" he asked. "Dost Mohammed is in the Feringhee camp."

This was certainly news of a startling character, yet it did not account for the looks of savage joy and exultation easily discernible in the features of those about me. Puzzled to account for this, because in my heart I knew well these men were all secretly devoted to the Dost's service, I begged the friendly chief to afford me an explanation.

"Their hearts are glad because yesterday the lion turned upon his Feringhee hunters and rent them in pieces," he replied.

"How could that be?" I asked curiously. "According to your own words, the Dost is now a prisoner in the British camp."

Upon this point, however, he could or would give no explanation; but on reaching the cantonments, I learned that at least the first part of his story was quite true.

That very afternoon, as Sir William Macnaghten was riding on the plain outside Cabul, the Dost, alone and unattended, came up unexpectedly and surrendered himself.

This strange event naturally caused a lively satisfaction; but the joy of the troops was alloyed by a gloomy though as yet unconfirmed rumour. A whisper stole through the camp that Sale's force in the Kohistan had met with a serious reverse, though in what way no one appeared exactly to know.

The ladies received me with anxious questionings, which unluckily admitted of no definite reply, but I laid great stress upon the fact of Dost Mohammed's voluntary surrender.

"It is not likely," I urged, "that he should select the morrow of a signal triumph to place himself in the hands of his enemies."

Still the rumour of our alleged defeat was so steady and persistent that I myself looked forward with no little apprehension to the next day's news.

"If any tidings should reach Cabul, you will not fail to let us know instantly?" Sara pleaded, as I left the bungalow.

"No; I will come or send word without delay. But do not, I beg, anticipate evil. To-morrow, when your father returns at the head of his company, you will laugh at these idle fears."

My words were brave enough, yet it was a relief to me

when, late in the afternoon of the following day, Captain Gurdon walked into my room.

"Welcome!" I cried, grasping his outstretched hand; "you are indeed doubly welcome. Is all well with you?"

"Yes; I have come to take you to the bungalow. Can you spare an hour or two?"

"Grant me five minutes' grace, and I am at your service."

"You have heard that the Dost is in our hands?" I remarked, as we left the house.

"A lucky thing for us. He is a splendid soldier, and could have given us no end of trouble. But I will keep my story until later."

"Has our Shakespearian friend come through safely?"

"Yes; but he is on duty, or you would have seen him."

On our way we met several of the officers who had been out with Sale, but paused only for a word of greeting, as the ladies were awaiting us.

"You were a true prophet, Paul," Sara said, the blue eyes shining with a happy smile.

"Which will teach you to place more faith in my words another time," I answered lightly, and we passed into the house together.

We were just sitting down to the evening meal, when a merry voice was heard declaiming, "'Unbidden guests are oftenest welcome when they are gone,' and doubtless the bard knew well what he was writing about. But in this particular instance we have the exception which proves the rule.—Mrs. Gurdon, to you I appeal for confirmation."

"Sit down, Brader," cried the captain laughing, "or you

will drive me to retaliate. If you will persist in these wretched remarks, I shall ask the colonel to banish you to Bamian or Charikar."

"The threat is too terrible," the young man replied; "I am instant obedience."

During the evening Captain Gurdon briefly related the adventures of the expeditionary force during the last few weeks.

"Really," he said, "with the exception of destroying a few forts, our operations consisted of a series of wearisome marches and counter-marches in a hopeless endeavour to surround the Dost and his followers. The day before yesterday we learned that the exiled monarch was in a village near the Gorebund River, and thither accordingly we went. For once the information proved correct. At our approach the Afghans swarmed out, and made for the neighbouring hills. Our infantry were too far off to intercept the fugitives, but the troopers, dividing into two sections, immediately started in pursuit. Anderson led his men to the left, while Fraser, with his two squadrons of Bengal cavalry, gained the head of the valley. What happened then I do not precisely know, but there was a disgraceful panic, and we have to mourn the loss of several gallant officers."

"I have been talking with Clarke," Brader interposed, "and according to his account the affair reflects little credit on our men. It seems that when they reached the valley a handful of Afghan horse was slowly climbing the hills above them. At their head was the Dost himself, and as Fraser's troopers formed up at the foot of the slope, they saw the Afghan leader pause and address a few words to

his followers. He pointed to his banners, and taking off his turban, lifted his eyes to heaven, as if invoking the aid of Allah. Then the little body wheeled round, and, led by Mohammed, came rushing down the hill, firing as they rode, and calling on Allah to help them to exterminate the infidel dogs. Fraser was delighted at this unexpected opportunity, and bade his men charge home. At the critical moment, however, the Bengalese troopers broke, and fled like a flock of sheep. Only the British officers remained, but they did their duty like men. With one grand sweep they burst upon the Afghans as bravely as if a dozen squadrons were at their backs. For a few minutes the fight was terrific, but the odds were too great; one after another fell covered with wounds, and scarcely a man emerged from the unequal strife."

"It is strange how a sudden panic will sometimes seize even the boldest troops," the captain remarked. "I have known men who have looked death in the face a hundred times without flinching, turn tail and run, apparently with neither rhyme nor reason."

"What perplexes me most is the Dost's sudden surrender," I said.

"If I have read his character aright, it is owing to his humanity. Finding that he cannot make headway against us, he has resolved to put an end to the incessant bloodshed which is deluging his unhappy country."

"At all events he is a splendid fellow," responded the lieutenant, "and I could find it in my heart to wish we were not forced to fight against him." A sentiment in which I felt sure the captain privately concurred.

CHAPTER IX.

A PERIOD OF PEACE.

WITH the unconditional surrender of Dost Mohammed, who shortly afterwards accompanied Sir Willoughby Cotton with a portion of the troops to India, it appeared as if the difficulties of the British had ended.

The Cabulese no longer murmured; the chiefs, even the fierce and warlike Ghilzais, bowed with the philosophy of their race to that which was apparently inevitable. Allah, in His inscrutable wisdom, had decreed their temporary subjugation, and they accepted His will.

One enemy there was still at large—a foe stern, relentless, implacable, whose heart throbbed with undying hatred towards the haughty invaders who had seized upon his country and driven his chivalrous father into exile.

In spite of promises of pardon and offers of reward, Akbar Khan, the Dost's son, resolutely refused to yield himself a prisoner.

Fortunately, however, for the present peace, Akbar's power was by no means equal to his animosity. He was a homeless fugitive, attended only by a scanty band of devoted followers; an outcast and a wanderer, biding his

time amongst the remote and well-nigh inaccessible fastnesses of the barren mountains.

"It is not my custom to prophesy evil," said the captain one day, when we were discussing the situation, "but I should feel much easier in mind if that young man were safely lodged with his father. Mark my words, Paul, Akbar Khan will yet cause us infinite trouble."

Still few of us took much thought for the morrow, and meanwhile there was little cause either for uneasiness or discontent.

The days passed swiftly in the performance of my duties, and almost every evening found me a welcome guest at the captain's dwelling, where also Lieutenant Brader spent a fair portion of his ample leisure.

The season was now growing too far advanced for open-air exercise in the evening, and brought up as I had been on the burning plains of Hindostan, I began to feel the extreme cold acutely.

Throughout December, when the shah and Sir William Macnaghten proceeded to Jelalabad in order to avoid the rigour of a Cabulese winter, the thermometer continued to fall, and the new year 1841 was ushered in by a fall of fine snow, which covered the surrounding district with a spotless mantle of white.

"What an extremely curious spectacle!" remarked Sara one morning, as we stood watching the downfall of the beautiful feathery flakes; "how astonished our English friends would be at this sight!"

I did not quite understand her meaning, and said,—

"Surely a snowstorm is not an unusual incident in an English winter!"

"No," she replied, with a merry laugh; "I was referring not so much to the snow as to the appearance of the heavens. Look, there is not a single cloud; the sky is quite blue, and the sun shines brightly. Now, in dear old England we naturally associate a snowstorm with a dreary winter's day, a dingy leaden sky, and an entire absence of sunshine."

"From your description, I should give the palm to the Afghan system."

"I am not so sure of the correctness of that judgment," interposed Sara's father, who had just joined us. "As a scenic display this is doubtless prettier, but I fear it will have a disastrous effect on the men's eyes. The white snow reflecting back the sun's rays will cause a fearful strain."

This observation I afterwards found to be perfectly just, as, in addition to many men who were compelled to go into hospital, one or two became temporarily blind.

Presently Sara exclaimed,—

"Papa, would it not be charming if we had some skates! I should so enjoy an afternoon on the ice.—Paul, do you skate?"

Before I had time to reply, her father said, "You forget that hitherto Paul has had no opportunity of practising the art.—By the way, Brader went to the lake this morning with some of the Cabulese chiefs. They will not believe that we English are acquainted with cold."

"Can the natives skate, papa?"

"No; but I believe they are very dexterous at sliding. However, here is Frank; he will enlighten us."

The lieutenant, having shaken the snow from his garments and hung up his greatcoat in the passage, now came in.

"Well," asked the captain, "what news? Have you demonstrated to our Pathan friends our familiarity with their winter pastime?"

"'Ah! no more of that, Hal, an thou lovest me,'" responded the young officer, with a gesture of comical despair. "Saunders's salve should be at a premium this afternoon; we are all more or less a mass of bruises. But from a spectator's point of view, the play must have been excruciatingly funny while it lasted. Shakespeare well said, 'How use doth breed a habit in a man!' but to-day we discovered that the converse holds equally true. Sliding is not an art that can be laid aside for a score of years to be resumed at a moment's notice."

Captain Gurdon laughed merrily.

"How did Markham fare?" he asked.

The young man looked at us with a droll twinkle.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "'thereby hangs a tale.' I fear Markham does not look upon me with favourable eyes. You know his solemn style. Like some 'most potent, grave, and reverend signior' he advanced upon the ice, giving one the impression of some heavily-freighted Dutch galleon setting slowly out on a long and dangerous voyage. 'Keep the pot a-boiling, sir,' shouted Charlie Durant, as he

came along with a rush. The slang and the smoothness of the ice combined proved too much for Markham. The hapless man came to a halt, and then began to turn slowly round—one foot making for Cabul; the other straying, cautiously but decidedly, in the direction of the Hindoo Koosh. Unhappily those wretched lines from Julius Cæsar came into my head, and I could not refrain from quoting them. Look, I cried, ‘he doth bestride the narrow world like a colossus.’”

“To which Markham replied—?”

“I did not stay for his reply. The laugh of the men was drowned in a sounding crash: Markham had lost his equilibrium. And the worst of it all is that the natives declare we are impostors who never saw a sheet of ice previously to coming into this country.”

“If only we had a few pairs of skates,” said Sara.

The young soldier jumped up excitedly.

“Miss Gurdon, you are a jewel! Why did I not think of it before?—Paul, come with me into the town; we will astonish these outlandish heathen yet.”

“But what is it you require?” I asked.

“An introduction to a respectable artificer—a worker in metals—who shall aid us to regain our forfeited superiority.”

Sara clapped her hands gleefully at this speech; she evidently understood the import of the young man’s words.

“Do not forget me, Mr. Brader,” she said archly; “I am passionately fond of skating.”

“To hear is to obey, Miss Gurdon,” he responded.—
“Come, Paul, let us seek this cunning craftsman; I am

eager to be avenged for the disasters of this morning." And after a hurried leave-taking we set forth.

The nature of my duties, and my knowledge of the language, naturally brought me into close contact with the natives, so that I had little difficulty in finding a man capable of executing the lieutenant's orders.

The excitement amongst my friends reigned high during the next few days, and infected even me, who knew nothing whatever of skating. Indeed, when the novel articles were completed, my astonishment was unbounded, and I expressed my sense of wonder freely.

"They are easily managed," Frank Brader said; "I prophesy that within a week you will be skimming over the surface of the lake like a swallow on the wing."

I cannot truthfully say that my companion's poetic flight of fancy was realized, yet it did come to pass that before the cold weather ended I was able to use my skates fairly well.

But on that first morning I preferred to act the rôle of spectator, in company with a body of Afghan chiefs, who had been attracted by a wild rumour of some marvellous exhibition which the Feringhees intended giving.

Marvellous, indeed, the sight proved to us who had never beheld the like, and many were the cries of wonder elicited by the grace and speed with which the British officers sped over the smooth ice.

But when Sara, whose skates had been fastened on by the lieutenant, struck out fearlessly over the lake, the excitement grew to its height, and the bearded warriors

exhausted all the glowing terms of Eastern imagery in expressing their astonishment and admiration.

To you, dear boys, who may perchance read this story, this skating-party on the Cabul plain will probably seem a mere commonplace scarcely worthy of chronicling. Carefully stowed away in some corner of your happy English home, each one of you has, ready to be brought forth at the first sign of ice, the familiar pair of skates, which has already, mayhap, been the cause of many enjoyable hours.

But to me who had never before seen a large sheet of ice, this easy, graceful, fairy-like mode of progression came as a revelation, and I stood gazing with delight at the skaters' elegant evolutions, bewailing regretfully my inability to imitate them.

Noticing my disconsolate mien, Frank offered, as we were returning homeward, to accompany me early the next morning to the lake, and give me a first lesson before the others arrived.

"That will be capital," Sara said. "Make haste and learn, Paul; then you and I will be able to skate together."

Thus the arrangement was made, and though my performances left much to be desired, yet, as I have already stated, I was soon able to keep my feet without danger of falling, and afterwards spent many agreeable hours in this exhilarating pastime.

Neither did skating constitute our sole amusement during the winter season.

At this time the relations existing between our troops and the natives were apparently of the most friendly

nature, and there was a constant interchange of visits between the officers and the Cabulese chiefs.

Entertainments were given and receptions held in the big houses, and at length some one conceived the brilliant idea of building a temporary theatre in the cantonments.

Brader was in ecstasy, and threw himself heart and soul into the work. Like many other estimable persons, he had a fixed idea that he had mistaken his vocation, and that Nature really intended him to shine upon the stage.

Why he should have cherished this most extraordinary delusion I could never comprehend, since he possessed no histrionic abilities whatever beyond the faculty of interlarding his conversation with odds and ends of quotations, not always appropriate, and culled for the most part from his beloved Shakespeare.

At all events he had a far larger share of success than the majority of aspiring actors, since he did perform, and before a unique audience.

Many years have passed since then, but even now at the mention of a theatre my mind travels back to the little building erected close to the lines of that gallant regiment the 13th Light Infantry.

I have but to close my eyes, and the strange yet brilliant spectacle rises vividly before me. The British officers and ladies, the stalwart Afghans richly apparelled, my own familiar friends, the primitive stage—I see them all, and, alas! my heart is heavy with vain sorrow and regret.

But though we may thus look back upon the past, the

future is mercifully hidden from our gaze, and it is well for us that it should be so.

I am unacquainted with the Prophet's views concerning plays, but certainly these particular followers of the faith enjoyed them immensely.

There were manifold difficulties, of course, not the least being that half the audience knew nothing of the language used by the actors; but this was surmounted by the aid of interpreters, and here my knowledge of the native dialect enabled me to render effective service.

Thus the long winter pleasantly passed, and was succeeded by a season of heavy rains, which lasted, with little intermission, from early in March until the end of May.

This period proved extremely disagreeable, as the steady, continuous downpour prevented us from enjoying any outdoor exercise, and kept us in strict confinement.

One of the officers of the 13th, a Captain Sinclair, occupied this time in superintending the building of a boat, properly equipped with oars, masts, sails, and every other requisite.

As soon as the rain ceased, this wonderful craft, the like of which had never before been seen in Afghanistan, was conveyed to the lake on carriages, and launched in the presence of a vast concourse.

Great as had been the astonishment of the natives at the skates, their amazement was now increased a thousand-fold. A floating house such as this, which could be swiftly propelled in any direction, and which could skim across the surface of the waters driven by the aid of the wind alone,

was utterly beyond their comprehension. They examined it critically, asking endless questions about every part, and striving hard to understand the explanations.

"Tell them about our huge battle-ships, with their hundreds of men and their heavy cannons," suggested Captain Gurdon to me.

They listened in silence to my descriptions of the mighty floating castles which then formed the British navy, and at the conclusion stroked their beards, muttering, "Allah is great."

Nor in truth was my wonder much less than theirs. Certainly my reading had made me acquainted with the existence of such things, but I had never before seen a properly fitted up boat such as this, and it was with intense delight that I accepted the offer to join Sara and her parents in a voyage across the lake.

"A new experience to you, Paul, is it not?" said Captain Gurdon, as we went scudding along with a brisk wind behind us. "But a sail is not always so pleasant as this.—Have you forgotten our passage in the troop-ship, my dear?"

His wife made a little grimace. "Do not speak of it, I beg; the experience was simply horrible. I wish with all my heart that some clever engineer would find a means of bridging the ocean.—I am a dreadfully bad sailor, Paul; and much as I love my country, the thought of a sea voyage makes me almost willing to remain in India for the rest of my life."

"Ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-

rats and water-rats, land-thieves and water-thieves—I mean pirates; and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks.’”

“Brader again! throw him overboard!” cried Charlie Durant. “To quote Shakespeare without provocation should be made a crime under the articles of war.”

“Then Brader would have been court-martialled the first time he opened his lips,” responded Lieutenant Pole.—“Miss Gurdon, can you not exert your authority over this strolling player?”

“I did but give point to Mrs. Gurdon’s remarks.

‘The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more.’

And for this am I to be

‘Sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head’?

Miss Gurdon, I throw myself on your protection; guard me from these wicked men.”

“I really fear you are incorrigible,” laughed Sara; “but perhaps, if you are very good, and promise to refrain from quoting any more, we will spare you this time from a watery grave.”

“You are kindness itself; your words rescue me from despair.

‘For this relief much—’”

but a shout of laughter drowned the rest.

“Mr. Brader,” said Sara, solemnly, “I must give you up; you have broken faith.”

"I am sorry, Miss Gurdon ; indeed, the fault was not mine. You see

'How use doth breed a habit in a man.'

Oh dear, another slip !"

"Never mind, Brader," exclaimed the captain : "we will find an excuse for you from the immortal bard,—

'Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.'"

By this time the boat's head was turned to the shore, and having some pressing business to transact, I left my friends directly we landed, and hurried home.

Thus quietly, and in innocent pleasures such as these, the time passed.

Now and again there was work for the soldiers in chastising some over-audacious marauders, and once news reached us of a stubborn fight with the Ghilzais, who had attacked the garrison at Khelat-i-Ghilzai.

These Ghilzais, who from first to last openly avowed their bitter enmity towards us, inhabited the country between Cabul and Jelalabad on the one side, and Cabul and Candahar on the other.

Primarily their occupation was that of agriculturists and shepherds, but in addition to these pursuits they exercised the calling of robbers, and woe to the unhappy traveller who fell into their clutches.

From their numbers were drawn the desperate fanatics who later on did us such grievous injury ; but for the present, as I have said, we in Cabul lived at peace, and

went in and out amongst the natives freely and unreservedly.

Nevertheless, unknown to all, save perhaps a few of our leaders, the clouds which denoted the coming storm were already gathering, and at the end of the summer a circumstance occurred which plunged us into a state of unrest and inquietude.

Thus far, during our occupation of the country, the principal chiefs had received heavy subsidies, for the purpose of inducing them to accept our rule, and with a few exceptions the plan had worked well.

Now, the envoy, who had meanwhile been made Governor of Bombay, was ordered by the Indian Government to cut down the grants of money which had hitherto been paid to the Afghan leaders.

It was an unfortunate order, as Sir William clearly recognized; still I suppose he had no option but to obey. Accordingly a *darbar*, to which all the interested chieftains were summoned, was held in Cabul, and there they were informed of the government's decision.

Now it happened that for several days, having been exceedingly busy, I had seen nothing of my friends, so in the evening I proposed to pay them a brief visit.

Until recently I had been in the habit of coming and going quite unarmed, and had not met with a single insult; but during the last day or two the aspect of the populace seemed to be slowly changing for the worse. Instead of the pleasant smile and the friendly "Allah be with you," I had caught sight of scowling faces, and

even heard muttered threats and angry words, which induced me to look carefully to the priming of my pistols before walking abroad.

On this particular evening my mind was far from calm. True, the envoy's durbar had apparently proved more successful than he could have reasonably anticipated. The chiefs certainly offered strong remonstrances against the lowering of the subsidies, but finding Sir William inflexible, they ceased cavilling, and the meeting broke up with renewed expressions of friendship on both sides.

But knowing what I did of the Afghan character, I could not quite trust this seeming submission, and resolved to act warily.

Revolving these thoughts I closed the door quietly and stepped into the street at the very moment that a turbaned warrior approached the house.

Enough of daylight still remained to distinguish his features clearly, and my heart sank a little as I recognized the fair skin and blue eyes of Umran Khan.

That encounter was a decidedly awkward one. There was no retreat open, and though single-handed I did not dread his powers, I knew well that the sound of a scuffle would bring a swarm of cut-throats to his aid.

Besides, my conscience was not quite at ease concerning my treatment of him; and, as Brader would have said, "conscience does make cowards of us all."

To my surprise his features exhibited no signs of displeasure, and he advanced toward me in friendly greeting. He made no allusion whatever to my sudden flight from

his camp, but speaking in low tones said, "Clevly Sahib, I saw you to-day, and determined not to leave Cabul without giving you warning. My heart would be desolate if aught of harm should befall you."

"Warning?" I echoed, dropping my voice, as he had done, to a whisper; "of what?"

"The Feringhees are brave fighting-men and not weaklings," he returned slowly. "Their hearts are bold, their arms strong, and blood, not water, runs in their veins. Sahib, your countrymen are warriors, and will die like men."

"Die!" I interposed, softly. "Umran Khan, what strange speech is this?" and I wondered if the wounds he had received in the terrible fight had impaired his reason.

Regarding me fixedly he went on: "Yes, the Feringhees lack not either strength or spirit, and yet they are doomed. It is the will of Allah; He has delivered them into the hands of His followers. So long hath Allah permitted your countrymen to pollute our soil with their presence, but now their days are numbered. Already the vulture snuffs up the air from afar, and the jackal whets his teeth in anticipation of the coming banquet. Sahib, look yonder at the broadening moon. Ere long beneath its cold light will lie the dead bodies of the Feringhee dogs, wrapped in rezais of snow, with the vulture and jackal for attendants."

"Do you mean that the chiefs intend to pit their strength against ours?" I asked, endeavouring to hide

my astonishment. "Have they not yet learned that the crow is no match for the eagle?"

"Sahib," he returned earnestly, "it is written. Upon the Koran has it been sworn that the infidels shall leave their bones to bleach in our land, and that none shall escape. But when I looked upon your face, my heart grew sad for the brave young chief who had eaten my salt, and I resolved to save him. Fly, sahib, whilst there is yet time; fly before our passions have been maddened by the taste of blood."

"And leave those dear to me to perish alone? No, my friend; my heart thanks you for your generous kindness, but howsoever it may fare with me, my place is here. Moreover, Umran Khan, you have been deceived; your moolahs have flattered you with false hopes and lying promises. Come with me and look upon our warriors; then you shall say what chance exists of your prophecy being fulfilled."

"There is no need," he replied; "we have counted your men, we know the number of your guns. For the last time I urge you to make your way through the passes before it becomes too late."

I shook my head. "Can you not see how impossible it is to follow your advice? To fly from imaginary peril would be ridiculous, while if the danger be serious I cannot desert my post."

Finding that his words produced no impression, he sorrowfully bade me farewell, and disappeared down an adjoining lane.

It was now much past the usual time for visiting the bungalow, but unable to rest until I had unburdened my mind of this strange warning I pushed straight on.

Mrs. Gurdon and Sara had already retired, but the captain was up, and to him I confided all that had passed.

He listened in silence, making no remark until I finished.

"The story has an ugly ring," he observed thoughtfully. "I must confess it is not half to my liking. How did the man's manner impress you?"

"He was certainly very much in earnest about my getting away, and I have no doubt that he thoroughly believed in his own story."

"Ah, the reduction in the subsidies will cause mischief, and we shall probably have a fight or two before things calm down. Beyond that, of course, there will be no practical danger; a dose or two from the guns will scatter the rebels like sheep."

"But about Umran's warning! shall I mention it to the chief?"

"There can be no harm in that, and I will manage so that it shall be brought to the ears of the general, but after all it is a very shadowy tale."

In this opinion I was forced to concur, but it was not an easy task to shake off the unpleasant sensation which the khan's words had created.

CHAPTER X.

THE REVOLT IN CABUL.

NO long time passed before the meaning of my late captor's information became abundantly plain. From various sources we learned that the Ghilzai chiefs were in open insurrection, that the passes were blocked from Cabul to the Khyber, and more serious still, that the moolahs were preaching far and wide a religious war.

This last report was of the gravest significance, since, should the priests once succeed in rousing the fanaticism and religious hatred of their followers, the outlook would become desperate.

But with regard to my own little group of friends, the larger aspect was soon swallowed up in a more personal matter.

On the ninth of October, Colonel Monteath marched out with the 35th Native Infantry and a company of sappers to clear the passes; while the next day was to witness the departure of Sir Robert Sale, at the head of the 13th European regiment.

I am not likely ever to forget the gloomy sorrow with

which for the last time we all gathered together in the bungalow.

Mrs. Gurdon managed to maintain her composure, but Sara could not keep back the tears as she clung to her father's arm.

In the presence of his wife and daughter Captain Gurdon preserved a cheerful demeanour, and affected to hold the dangers of the coming expedition in light esteem.

"There is nothing of which to be afraid," he said, with an air of assurance which perhaps he scarcely felt: "the journey may not be exactly a pleasure trip, but after teaching the enemy a lesson or two, we shall not meet with much opposition."

"Keep up your courage, Miss Sara," chimed in the irrepressible lieutenant. "What does the bard say? 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;' and again, 'Out of this nettle danger we pluck this flower safety.' Now that quotation I consider strikingly appropriate. We will 'pluck this flower safety,' and present it to you."

"Bravo!" said Captain Gurdon, patting the young man on the back; "that is very neat and graceful."

"Better still, sir, I believe it to be true. In a short time Mrs. and Miss Gurdon will be safe in India, looking back with wonder at the time they spent in this detestable land."

"Meanwhile, my dear," said the captain, turning to his wife, "we leave you in good hands. Even before asking him, I am sure that Paul will do anything in his power to help you."

"Indeed," I cried earnestly, "Mrs. Gurdon need have no doubt on that point; my services are entirely at her disposal. I do not anticipate any danger, but should such arise, my first care will be to secure the safety of the ladies."

When I bade them farewell, the captain intimated his intention of accompanying me to the gate, and once outside the house I perceived that his cheerful smile had been but a mask to conceal his real feelings.

"Yes," he said, in answer to my implied question, "I am genuinely uneasy. One must keep up a brave face before the ladies, but the situation is far from bright. Not that I fear any disaster to the 13th, but rather to those who are left behind."

"But it is scarcely likely that any harm will happen to us. Once inside the Bala Hissar we should be safe against all the Afghans in the country."

"We must hope for the best," he replied; "but personally I fear the worst. Still it comforts me a great deal to know that my dear ones have a stout friend close at hand."

"Captain Gurdon, I will guard them with my life," I said solemnly; "here is my hand upon it."

"God bless you, Paul! Farewell! it is hard to tell if ever we may meet again."

Standing at the gate I watched the slowly-retreating figure until it disappeared, and then sorrowfully wended my lonely way cityward.

Deprived of the captain's society, Sara and her mother

now clung to me more closely than ever, and were plunged into deep distress if a day passed without a visit from me.

Fortunately my position enabled me to keep them well informed as to Sir Robert Sale's movements, and the continued safety both of Captain Gurdon and the lieutenant.

But in spite of this welcome news I could not help feeling that we stood on the brink of a volcano, slumbering as yet, but prepared at any moment to burst into active flames. The unfeigned hostility of the natives spread and deepened. They no longer concealed their aversion to our rule, but paraded it, and openly boasted of the time when Allah should deliver us into their hands.

Of course I made no mention of the fact to Sara and her mother, but the nightly journeys to and from the cantonments were now attended with considerable risk. So daring and vindictive had the Cabulese become, that it was no longer safe for our men, at least unattended, to leave their quarters.

In this state of anxiety the month of October passed, and each succeeding day strengthened my wish that we were all safely lodged behind the walls of the frowning Bala Hissar.

My gloomy fears were soon amply confirmed. Early in the morning of the second of November I was awakened by an unusual commotion in the city, and hurriedly dressing I ran out into the street.

It was quite deserted, but the noise of the multitude close at hand convinced me that some startling danger was imminent.

Guided by the sound of the tumult, I made my way swiftly but cautiously through the narrow lanes, until at last I came in sight of a vast body of armed men.

By this time the uproar was deafening, and the spectacle upon which I gazed might well have caused even a stout heart to quail. The street was packed, and the face of each man in that angry crowd wore an expression of bitter hatred and savage ferocity.

Crouched in the angle of a doorway, I held my breath and listened eagerly to catch any words which might indicate what was about to happen.

Apparently the rioters were themselves undecided. They swayed irresolutely in this direction and that, until at length one fierce cry bore down all the rest—"Burnes Sahib! Burnes Sahib! come, we will give his heart to the dogs."

The crowd answered by a yell of rage, and sweeping forward left the street empty.

Now Sir Alexander Burnes lived in a house in the city directly opposite to the Treasury, so that unless aid speedily arrived, the Cabulense would have a fine opportunity both for murder and pillage.

For a few seconds I stood anxiously debating the best course to be pursued. To cut my way through that armed mob was an impossibility, and even should I succeed in gaining Sir Alexander's residence, of what avail would be my single arm?

I thought, but only to reject the notion, of running to the cantonments. A British force might arrive in time

for vengeance, but not for succour. There remained the Bala Hissar, and without further delay I started in that direction.

Happily my knowledge of the town served me in good stead, and choosing the more deserted streets I sped along, panting and almost breathless. Once or twice a stray bullet whistled past my head, but I ran too swiftly to present an easy target, and the only effect was to hurry me along the faster.

At the gate of the Bala Hissar a group of officers stood gazing eagerly toward the city. They would have questioned me, but the seconds were too precious to be wasted.

"They are murdering Sir Alexander and sacking the Treasury," I cried. "If you would be in time, hasten; there is not a moment to be lost."

"What force have they?" asked one.

"Every fighting man the city holds. But hurry; while we stand here Sir Alexander is most likely being hacked in pieces."

Doubtless little time was lost, but I was impatient of delay, my blood was on fire, every minute seemed an age, until a body of the shah's troops, headed by Captain Campbell, marched out from the fortress.

We pushed on rapidly, straight through the heart of the city, until our further progress was barred by an angry and excited crowd.

In vain we charged, in vain the two guns which accompanied us belched forth an iron storm; the Cabulese stood

their ground manfully, and would not be turned either to the right or to the left.

Meanwhile our men were dropping fast. From all sides came a murderous fire; every house was a fortress, every wall a barricade. The narrow lane was littered with the dead, and over them the most ferocious of the Afghans rushed with fearful cries, hurling themselves recklessly upon our little force.

Very reluctantly, Captain Campbell, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, issued the order to fall back.

To have persevered in the face of such odds would have been simply madness, more especially as we were fighting now without an object. At the very outset of the struggle, a tongue of fire leaping skyward proclaimed that we were too late, and in our hearts we knew that the gallant men for whom we fought were beyond human aid.

Slowly, and in good order as yet, we began to retrace our steps; but the Afghans, drunk with their recent success, never left us. Again and again with a simultaneous rush they flung themselves bodily upon us, hacking and cutting with their swords, until it seemed as if not a single man would ever reach the Bala Hissar to relate the story.

But each time we recovered from the shock and formed up in good order, though with sadly diminished numbers, until the sight of the fortress almost within reach revived our drooping energies.

Again the Afghans, with a cry as of some wild beast that sees its prey escaping, sprang forward with a rush, sweeping and irresistible. Nothing could stop them. Our men, wearied and fatigued with continual fighting, wavered; the guns were abandoned to the triumphant enemy, who, passing them rapidly to the rear, prepared to press home their victory.

In parrying a sword-thrust my foot slipped, and I fell; but before the Afghan could take advantage of my helplessness, the sound of a British cheer came borne on the air, and I saw a body of red-coats advancing at the double.

My antagonist made a savage slash, narrowly missing my head, and ran to join his countrymen, who were now in full retreat, carrying off with them as trophies the captured guns.

This diversion in our favour was made just in time, and we reached the Bala Hissar without further molestation.

Here I found Brigadier Shelton, who had marched his troops from the Seah Sung hills, and having sent one portion into the cantonments, had thrown himself with the remainder into the fortress.

Several of the officers hearing that I had brought the first information of the rising, now clustered round me, eager to learn all that I could tell of the incident.

This of course was very little, scarcely more indeed than they knew themselves.

The red glare of the burning buildings told us that the Treasury and Sir Alexander's residence were destroyed;

concerning the fate of the gallant men we could only gloomily conjecture.

One question was in the heart and on the lips of all—Was it possible that they had escaped?

One or two of the more sanguine did not entirely give up hope; but I, who had witnessed the ferocity of that savage mob, feared the worst.

All this time, too, I was troubled by another and more personal matter. The news of the revolt must by this time have spread throughout the cantonments, and I was afraid lest Mrs. Gurdon and Sara should think me dead.

The further I considered this idea the stronger it grew, and I resolved upon making an attempt to reach my friends.

Crossing the city was clearly out of the question, but by leaving the fortress on the side of the Jelalabad road, I could make my way to the Seah Sung hills, whence lay a direct road to the cantonments.

Captain Campbell, to whom I explained my wish, promptly gave his consent, and towards dusk guided me to the best place of exit.

“I do not think there is much danger,” he remarked, “unless the Afghans hold the bridge across the river; but that is unlikely. Keep straight on for the hills, and then follow the track of Brigadier Shelton’s troops. Good-bye, and good luck. I shall not forget the aid you rendered this morning if we come safely through this.”

I stepped along at a brisk pace over the deserted road

for nearly a mile, which brought me opposite the gap in the hills. Making for this I soon struck the Cabul road, and a quarter of an hour's sharp walking brought me to the river, which I crossed in safety.

Thus far there had been no sign of an enemy, but now from north and south came the sounds of heavy firing, which induced me to proceed with greater caution.

"The Afghans must be in possession of the Rikabashee fort," I thought. "So much the better for me, as in that case I shall hardly be likely to meet with any stragglers on the road."

This reasoning, however, proved at fault. I had nearly reached the canal, when I heard the clatter of horses' hoofs coming towards me. There was barely time for me to throw myself back into the shadow of the road, when about a score of mounted Afghans dashed by, followed by a rattling volley of musketry.

Finding that the fire was not repeated, I now hurried forward in time to overtake a detachment of red-coats under the command of Lieutenant Pole, an officer who was an intimate friend of the Gurdons.

"Paul Clevely!" he exclaimed, in surprise; "this is a welcome meeting. The ladies have almost given up hope of seeing you again. We reckoned you had gone over to the majority. From whence have you come?"

"The Bala Hissar. Has any news been received concerning Sir Alexander?"

The officer shook his head mournfully. "None! Is there no hope?"

"I fear not. Campbell, with a body of the shah's troops, made a desperate attempt to force a way through to the scene, but was driven back, having lost a number of men."

"We shall have to shell the city; that will bring them to their senses. But I must leave you here. Are you going on to the bungalow?"

"Yes, for a minute, just to show myself."

"Well, good-night; I must try to have a long chat with you in the morning."

It was now growing late, but the ladies, whose minds were a prey to doubt and anxiety, had not yet retired, and my knock was speedily answered by Mohammed Ali, a Mohammedan youth in their employ.

He stared at me a moment, as if doubting the evidence of his senses, and then shouted lustily, "The sahib! the young sahib is alive; he is here, Allah be praised!"

So much noise did he make that Mrs. Gurdon and her daughter came running out from an inner room.

The young girl's eyes were moist with tears of joy. "Paul!" she cried; "can it really be true? Thank God you have returned to us. I feared that you were dead."

"I knew you would be anxious when the news of the rising came," I said; "but happily I have escaped without even a scratch."

"And our poor people in the city, how have they fared?" she asked, pityingly.

"I fear that Sir Alexander and his brave comrades must have fallen victims to the fury of the Cabulcse.

Still that is simply conjecture ; I know nothing definitely."

The young girl was about to speak again, when her mother interposed. "Sara, I am afraid that in our joy at seeing Paul once more we have overlooked the fact that he is most likely hungry."

This was quite true, as I had eaten little since the previous night, and it was with a keen appetite that I sat down to the substantial supper which Mrs. Gurdon caused to be laid.

"Now I feel better," I said at the conclusion of the meal, "and if you like will relate my adventures."

"We shall form an eager audience," asserted Mrs. Gurdon ; "no one here seems clearly to understand what has taken place except that the city is in an uproar."

They listened attentively to my description of the various incidents, and I was just telling them of the meeting with Lieutenant Pole, when we were all startled by a hasty knock at the outer door.

Our visitor proved to be Mr. Raymond, who was my immediate superior in the political department.

"Sorry to disturb you at such a late hour, Mrs. Gurdon," he said, shaking hands with that lady and Sara ; "but my business is with this young gentleman. Reginald Pole told me I should find him here.—Glad to see you, my boy, uncommonly glad ; scarcely expected to have that pleasure again. I suppose you can give us no information concerning poor Burnes ?"

In a few brief sentences I told him all I knew about

the revolt of the Cabulese, with the attack on the Treasury and Sir Alexander's residence.

"Then in your opinion this is not the result of a mere temporary ebullition of anger, but a serious rebellion, perhaps fostered by the chiefs?"

"I may, of course, be mistaken, but that is my belief."

He seemed a trifle disconcerted by my answer, and turning to our hostess said, "Pardon me, Mrs. Gurdon, for carrying off our young friend so unceremoniously; but the call of duty is imperative, and there are weighty matters to be discussed."

Wishing the ladies good-night he considerably left the room, thinking, perhaps, that I should prefer to say adieu in private.

"Where will you sleep, Paul?" Mrs. Gurdon asked; "you cannot return to the city."

"No: until the pothar is at an end I suppose they will find me a bed in the mission compound, in which case I shall be close at hand."

"That will be much nicer," Sara declared, with a pretty wave of colour in her cheeks, "and far more safe than being alone in Cabul. I could not rest knowing that you were in that horrid place."

"Yes, it certainly will be safer. But I must not keep Mr. Raymond waiting longer;" and bidding them adieu, I hastened out after my chief.

"Clevely," said Mr. Raymond, linking his arm in mine, "this outbreak is a very serious matter, though it is not well, perhaps, to proclaim the fact in public. Unfortu-

nately the affair will not end with this morning's massacre ; the rebels have gone too far to submit peacefully, and will strain every nerve to make their rising good. But I need not dwell on that. I suppose you do not know anything about Mackenzie ? ”

This was the officer in charge of the shah's commissariat stores, which by a singular error of judgment had been placed in a fort situated within the city.

“ No,” I returned ; “ but it is hardly likely the natives will miss so good an opportunity of striking us a heavy blow.”

“ Do you think it practicable to get a note delivered to Mackenzie ? ”

“ There is a chance, of course, but the attempt will be attended with great risks,” I replied slowly.

“ That is true ; still the trial ought to be made. The natives have a strong force in possession of Mohammed Shereef's fort, and numerous parties are continually passing to and fro between it and the city. Now I should judge that it would not be difficult for a sharp man well acquainted with the dialect to join one of these bodies, and thus slip into the town ; the darkness of the night would be in his favour.”

I began to perceive the drift of these remarks, and made answer accordingly.

“ I am quite willing to undertake the errand,” I said ; “ but it seems to me that the real danger lies inside and not without the town. If, as I imagine, the Afghans are besieging the fort, how is Mackenzie to be reached ? ”

"That can only be decided on the spot. Should the obstacle prove insurmountable you must return. In any case the journey will not be fruitless, as you will be able to give us an idea as to how far the revolt has spread."

By this time we had reached the mission compound, behind which lay the mission offices, where I speedily donned the simple disguise which Mr. Raymond provided.

Slipping the note inside my jacket, which I had not discarded, but merely covered with a coarse blue smock, I carefully adjusted the loonghee, a piece of cloth commonly worn by the Afghans as a turban, and prepared to start.

Mr. Raymond accompanied me as far as the gate, in order to give his last words of instruction and advice.

"Remember, I have no desire that you should plunge into needless danger," he said. "Naturally you must be prepared to run a certain amount of risk, but do not expose yourself heedlessly. If you are discovered before reaching the city, do not forget that Warren still holds the commissariat fort, where you will find shelter. And now good-bye and God-speed."

"Say nothing of this to Mrs. Gurdon and her daughter," I enjoined strictly; "at present they need know no more than that I am too busy to visit them. If I am not back within a day or two, you can accept my absence as a sign that all is over."

"It is poor policy to look on the dark side of things," he answered cheerily. "By the way, our fellows are going to throw a few shells into Mohammed Shereef's

fort; so it will be advisable to work round to the magazine fort and then strike the road higher up, by the Shah Bagh."

"Or follow the canal to the city, and trust to luck for getting in. However, I shall be better able to judge presently. Good-bye; there is no moon, that is one comfort,"—and passing the sentry, I was fairly started on my dangerous errand.

CHAPTER XI.

GALLANT MACKENZIE.

IN Mr. Raymond's presence I felt it would be unbecoming on my part to dwell strongly upon the perils which must necessarily surround such an enterprise as that to which I now stood committed, but I did not therefore minimize the real danger.

With the exception of the commissariat fort, which was garrisoned by Lieutenant Warren and a hundred sepoys, the country between the cantonments and Cabul was now practically in the hands of the revolvers.

Still, trusting to my knowledge of the language and to my intimate acquaintance with the Afghan character, I did not despair of reaching the city safely, but how to direct my movements afterwards was what perplexed me.

Dismissing these thoughts for the present, however, I trudged on resolutely, keeping a keen look-out for any traces of the enemy.

From all sides came the sounds of heavy firing, and I judged it prudent to keep straight ahead until after passing Mohammed Shereef's fort, when, diverging to the right, I gradually approached the Kohistan road, a little beyond the commissariat fort.

Here it became necessary to make a final decision as to the course I should pursue.

Two routes lay open before me. I could either take the road which led straight to the Bala Hissar, and so into the city through the Lahore gate, or boldly cast in my lot with the natives, a body of whom were even now advancing from the direction of Mohammed Shereef's fort.

The first plan offered several objections, two of which struck me very forcibly. The fact of my being alone must inevitably excite suspicion should I unluckily meet with any of the Cabulese; and the road across the river was commanded by Mahmoud Khan's fort, which the Afghans held in force.

At first sight the other plan appeared still more hazardous, but it was one of those situations where safety is to be found in the greatest danger, and I determined to risk it.

While I was thus debating, the noise of the approaching rebels became plainer and more distinct, and it was evident that they were present in large numbers.

Fortunately for my design, those in front, instead of proceeding straight on, turned in the direction of Mahmoud's fort, so that by the time the error was discovered and rectified the whole body was thrown into confusion.

Lying hidden behind a slight eminence I could hear all that passed, and was rejoiced to find that these men did not belong to Cabul, but were Kohistanees who had been attracted to the town by the tidings of the tumult.

This was very lucky, inasmuch as it made the chance

of detection less, and I no longer hesitated to put my scheme into execution.

They did not march in any regular formation, but tramped along anyhow, straggling all over the road; some pressing on fiercely, others loitering by the wayside as if wearied with their exertions.

Having allowed the main body to pass, I crept from my hiding-place and walked slowly along the road, away from the city.

Agreeably to my expectations I soon encountered a group of laggards, and greeted them boldly.

"I am seeking tidings of Umran Khan," I exclaimed when they had returned my salutation. "Can my brothers tell me aught of his movements? This night he was to have met me at the Kohistan gate; I fear lest he should have come to harm."

"Umran Khan! is he not a chief of the Khyberees?" asked one.

"That is he!" I cried, with simulated eagerness. "Why do his footsteps linger?"

"He has not yet returned from the slaughter of the Feringhees in the passes. But tell us, is it true that the brave Cabulese have killed the chief sahib?"

"They have slain one of the leaders and looted the Treasury."

"Now, Allah be praised, we will sharpen our swords on the necks of these *sugs*. Come, children, let us hasten."

The term *sugs* is a contemptuous expression, meaning "dogs;" but I thought within myself that the time would

yet come when these truculent natives would find to their sorrow that the dogs possessed sharp teeth.

Aloud I said,—

“ We will travel in company, since it appears that my errand is a bootless one, and there is much to be done in the city.”

The Kohistanees offered no objection to this proposal, but quickened their steps, while I kept by the side of the man who had acted as spokesman. Before the gate was reached we came up with the main body, and all passed through together.

It was now the dead of night, but the streets were thronged by a dense mob, fierce and vindictive. Everywhere dark, scowling faces full of hatred and rancour were visible, and the air resounded with threats of vengeance against the detested foreigners.

The arrival of the Kohistanees was the signal for a yell of triumph, and the presence of these redoubtable warriors added fresh fuel to the flames.

Yet there was one matter which upon reflection afforded me a little comfort. After all, this vast crowd was a mob only; wild, fierce, and savage, truly, but still a mob, undisciplined, without a leader, or rather with a superabundance of leaders, united only upon one point—the extermination of the infidels—but otherwise without order and without singleness of purpose.

In the confusion it was impossible to keep with my newly-formed acquaintances, nor had I the wish to do so. My object now was to gain access to Captain Mackenzie’s

fort, and my sole chance of safety lay in not being recognized.

The mere idea of being detected caused me to shudder. If these men should discover that here, in their very midst, was one of the hated Feringhees, their passions would be inflamed to madness; they would tear me limb from limb.

But for the present I was secure. With the exercise of ordinary caution there was little risk of detection until broad day, and by that time I hoped to have gained the friendly shelter of the fort.

Very soon, however, I was to receive ample proof how impracticable was my idea.

The booming of heavy guns and the rattle of musketry became more distinct; the cries of the Cabulese grew fiercer and more shrill; while occasionally high above the yells of rage there rose a shriek of pain, the meaning of which every soldier knows but too well.

I was approaching Captain Mackenzie's fort, which, there could no longer be any room for doubt, was the object of a furious assault.

My heart sank at the spectacle now spread before my view. Hitherto, although experiencing considerable difficulty, I had made my way in the direction I wished; but now my will and strength were alike powerless. I was like a drop of water forming a tiny part of some mighty billow, inseparable from which I was hurled backwards and forwards, now dashed almost to the very walls of the fort, now swept back with equal velocity.

I looked in amazement at the wide sea of human heads. Whence had all these people sprung? It seemed almost as if the genius of the country had converted the very rocks into soldiers and poured them into the revolted city.

I no longer hoped either for Mackenzie or for myself. What could he, gallant soldier though he was, accomplish with his scanty following against that savage horde? Encumbered by women and children, impeded by his wounded, short as by this time he must necessarily be of ammunition, what could he do but die like a brave warrior, sword in hand?

And moreover, meagre as his force was, only a small proportion were British soldiers, the others being natives in the shah's service. But now, as on so many other occasions, British pluck and valour proved contagious, and the men of another race and colour vied with their European comrades in the bravery with which they supported their leader.

As I stood gazing, my heart swelled with pride at the sight of his heroic defence. Not that I would disparage the prowess of the besiegers. None could have thrown their lives away more recklessly, none could have looked in death's face with a stouter courage; but they were many to one, and fought not simply for life and honour, but for a terrible vengeance and in the full assurance of victory.

With regard to my errand, it was at an end. I was shut off from the fort by a living wall which effectually barred all further passage.

The night hours, too, were fast slipping away, and with

the advent of day the Afghans would almost certainly penetrate my flimsy disguise.

A return to the cantonments was now out of the question; equally impossible was it to find a safe hiding-place; yet I could not remain in the present perilous position.

Presently came the sound of a mighty explosion, and a red tongue of fire leaped into the sky, casting for a brief space a lurid light over the weird scene.

By its glow I caught sight of the features of my nearest neighbour, and could scarcely repress an exclamation of astonishment.

Pressing the man's arm cautiously, I said in Persian,—

“Why should the sheep venture into the midst of the wolves? Are not the fangs of the latter red with blood? and is their fierce hunger yet satisfied?”

The person to whom I addressed these remarks grasped my hand.

“Peace!” he replied nervously; “let the tongue of the unknown be still. In the midst of danger it is the part of the wise man to preserve silence.”

“When the hounds are in full cry, the fox seeks safety in his burrow. Do I make my meaning plain, friend of him whose soul hath departed? If so, lead the way; I will follow closely.”

Very slowly, and with an infinitude of trouble, we burrowed our course through the outskirts of the crowd, plunging further into the city, until my guide halted at the entrance to a narrow and filthy court, which appeared utterly deserted.

At the door of a low, mean, dirty-looking house he gave a peculiar knock, which was promptly answered, and after a whispered colloquy we passed into the interior of the building.

On our right was a small, dingy room, and this I entered in the company of the guide and his attendant.

Now, strangely enough, I was entirely unprepared for what followed, though the proceeding was perfectly natural.

The man who had just saved my life was Rao Singh, an assistant to Sir Alexander Burnes and a loyal servant of the Indian Government; but though I had recognized him, I quite forgot that as yet he was unaware of my identity.

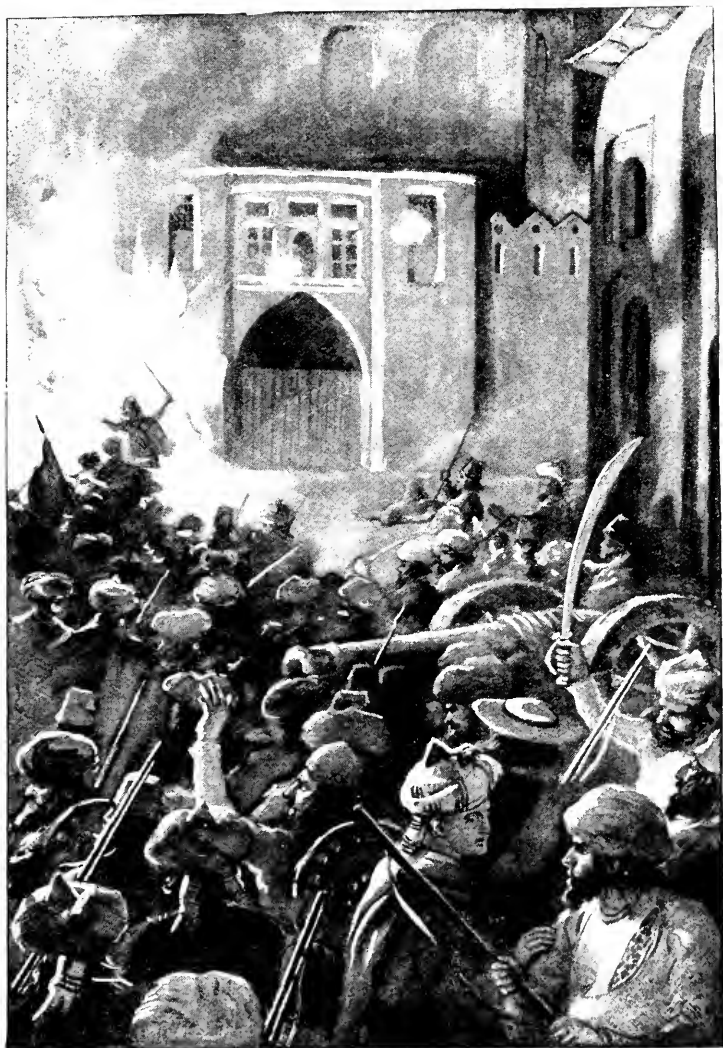
Frightened at my speech, and knowing that amongst the fierce fanatics his life was not worth a moment's purchase, he gladly yielded to my hints, and hurried me away from the scene of conflict.

By this course he not only avoided the risk of discovery by the Afghans, but got me completely into his power—a fact which he proceeded to demonstrate in the most unpleasant manner.

Forgetful that he had any cause for suspicion, I stood carelessly in the centre of the room, congratulating myself on this providential escape, when at a given signal the second man, slipping behind, threw his arms round my body, holding me as in a vice.

At the same time Rao Singh covered me with a pistol, threatening to fire if I offered the slightest resistance.

This being impossible, I made a virtue of necessity,



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Presently came the sound of a mighty explosion (p. 191)

and remained still, though much astonished at his strange conduct.

"Allah must have endowed my brother with great daring or little brains," he said, "that he should thus thrust himself alone into Rao Singh's secret hiding-place! Is my brother weary of life? Have the waters turned bitter in his mouth?"

These words explained everything and set my mind at ease.

"The sahib's compliments were without foundation," I answered. "Once I heard him say that Rao Singh's glance was keener than the eagle's, and his wisdom more subtle than that of the serpent. But in his heart the great sahib must have laughed when these honeyed phrases fell from his lips. What would he say if I could tell him that the cunning of his chief favourite was not sufficient to distinguish between a Feringhee and a son of the mountains? Moisten thy palm, Rao Singh, and anoint thine eyelids; they have become fast. Canst thou not tell Clevely Sahib from a Ghilzai fanatic? By my faith, the disguise is better than I dreamed."

Rao Singh stared incredulously for a little while, then bidding his companion unhand me, he replaced his pistol.

"The sahib will pardon his servant," he said; "for truly I acted in ignorance, and the times are evil."

"It was my fault, Rao Singh," I interrupted; "no blame lies with you. You have saved my life, and I am grateful. But I need your advice also. How am I to get into the fort?"

He shook his head sadly.

"Allah is great, and by none other could such a miracle be wrought," he answered. "Has the young sahib forgotten what his eyes saw so lately? Moreover, unless the Feringhees come quickly there will be no more fort, and the souls of the few British warriors will be with that of the great sahib."

"Not so, my friend. Can a pack of wolves hunt the tiger from his lair?"

Rao Singh appeared to reflect.

"Listen!" he said presently. "Once on a journey through the mountains I perceived a flock of vultures hovering over a narrow pass. They uttered shrill cries, and at intervals swooped in a body to the earth. As I stood watching others came, and yet more, until the air was black with the flapping of their wings. Curious to know the reason for their strange behaviour, I climbed a steep rock, taking care not to disturb the birds. But my caution proved needless; so interested were they that they paid no heed to my presence. Looking down from the brow of the cliff, I saw, stretched across the path, a tiger, wounded and unable to rise. And even as I gazed there descended a black cloud, resting for an instant on the body of the sick beast. Many times was the movement repeated, until at last the vultures made a final swoop, to rise not again till surfeited with their banquet. Sahib, the birds had pecked the tiger to death! I have spoken."

"But something must be done," I cried, extremely agi-

tated. "I must return to the cantonments. The peril is great, but it must be faced."

Rao Singh laid his hand on my arm.

"If the sacrifice of your life or mine would bring the wished-for aid, I would not say nay to the proposition. Were I to propose that you should blow out your brains for the good of your people, you would deem me mad. Yet would my madness be no greater than yours. Moreover, it must be known how ill it fares with those inside the fort, and even now, perhaps, your countrymen are marching to the rescue. Remain here quietly with me. At dusk we will venture forth, and if Allah wills you shall make the attempt."

Though my spirit rebelled against this advice, I could not deny its wisdom; and squatting upon the floor, I prepared to pass the weary hours until the coming of the friendly night.

Presently I questioned Rao Singh concerning the uprising in which Sir Alexander Burnes lost his life.

My companion answered very sorrowfully.

"That there had been much idle boasting lately amongst the Cabulese was no secret," he said; "but you know how little Burnes Sahib feared. He smiled at my information, saying: 'Rao Singh, there is a proverb in our language which runs, "A barking dog never bites," and its truth is verified throughout the world.'

"Even when the rioting had begun he believed that it could be quelled by a few words. The three sahibs (the other two being Sir Alexander's brother and George

Broadfoot, who acted as secretary) faced the Cabulese, and Burnes Sahib spoke boldly. At first all went well: the Cabulese listened; their angry cries ceased; it seemed as if some potent magic dwelt in his words; when suddenly we heard a fierce yell, and shouts of 'Kill! kill!' A crowd of fanatics brandishing their swords poured into the open space, and I knew that all was over. The sahibs fought well, but what could they do against such numbers? One fell, his body slashed with wounds: that was Broadfoot Sahib, and his sword had drunk the life-blood of six Dooranees. The last scene of all took place in the garden behind the house. There the two brothers, their swords red, their pistols empty, fought till their arms grew wearied. Thus fighting, they laid down their lives, with a proud smile on their faces;" and Rao Singh bowed his head reverently in homage to the heroic dead.

"What will you do now?" I questioned.

"There is safety for me in the Kuzilbash quarter," my companion answered. "Thither I shall go when once I have seen the young sahib depart."

In conversation like this we passed the day, hoping against hope that our friends in the fort might still be holding out.

But, as Rao Singh explained, even if the Afghans failed to force an entrance, the garrison must still succumb owing to a lack of water, without which the strongest and most resolute are reduced to a condition of helplessness.

Still we derived a trifling comfort from the continued silence in our immediate neighbourhood, inasmuch as we

knew how speedily the triumphant mob, having destroyed the fort, would spread through the city proclaiming their victory.

Slowly, all too slowly for my impetuous spirit, the daylight faded, until the earth lay wrapped in the mantle of night, and we ventured forth from our hiding-place.

That quarter of the town in which we now were was deserted. For a space we met no living thing save a few curs that snapped at our heels and then ran yelping away in the darkness.

But long before we reached the vicinity of the fort the death-like silence gave place to the roar of an angry multitude.

"The tiger may be sore wounded, but his claws are yet sharp and his bite dangerous," I cried vauntingly. "Come; even now, perchance, I may strike a blow in defence of my countrymen."

Rao Singh made an energetic gesture of dissent, but he hurried along nevertheless until once again we mingled with the excited throng.

Well might my heart thrill with pride as I considered the obstinate bravery of that heroic garrison. For two whole days now had they stood, unwearied, though without a moment's rest, battling hour after hour, patient and uncomplaining still, against a mighty host of cruel, relentless enemies.

Now, alas, the end was at hand. The fire from the fort slackened, almost ceased; during those two days of incessant fighting the ammunition had dwindled to barely a few rounds for each man.

The Afghans redoubled their energies; nearer and nearer they pushed their mines to the doomed fort, until a tremendous explosion occurred, followed by a wild shout of triumph.

I turned toward Rao Singh.

"What is it?" I asked falteringly; "what has happened?"

"Sahib," he answered, "it is Allah's will. We are all in the hands of Allah. The gate has been blown down."

What a world of anguish lay hidden behind those simple words, "The gate has been blown down." I saw as in a vision the murderous rush of those black-browed men; my ears were pierced by the shrieks of the women and the sobbing of little children; I heard the death-cries of the helpless wounded, and clearly—ah so clearly—the sharp, stern hurrah of the few Englishmen who could yet meet the foe sword in hand, and die with a cheer for their country on their lips.

"Hurrah!" Was I dreaming, or had the excitement turned my brain? Whence came that joyous sound? I gazed at the natives. Why did they stand motionless and dumb? Why did they not begin the work of butchery? Were they playing with their prey as a cat plays with a mouse?

But again a British hurrah rang out, and this time I could not be mistaken. My heart beat faster as I realized what that sound must mean—a rescue-party from the cantonments just in time to snatch the devoted garrison out of the very jaws of death!

I turned round in the direction of the Kohistan gate ; but, alas, I could see, could hear nothing ! Where were the glorious British colours ? Why did not the guns speak ? Why did the Cabulese on the outskirts of the crowd remain firm and unthinned ? Above all, why did not those in front of me accomplish their task of butchery while yet there was time ? As yet the rescuers were not in sight, but every moment of delay now meant a better chance of safety for the garrison.

With Rao Singh at my side I pressed eagerly forward through the vacillating, irresolute mob. As yet I had no idea of the sublime truth. I only saw Mackenzie with his women and children, his sick and wounded, his handful of soldiers, cooped up in a broken fort, at the mercy of a countless horde, with but one frail chance of life—the quick coming of their rescuers.

This was my dream ; but when my natural eyes beheld the reality, I grew dizzy with excitement. The fancied rescuers proved but a figment of my imagination ; the garrison, the heroic garrison, was working out its own salvation !

Little wonder that the Afghans were cowed ; little wonder that for a space their arms hung as if paralyzed by their sides ; they were like hounds that, chasing the fox, have unexpectedly struck a lion's den.

On came that gallant band of heroes, led by the valiant Mackenzie—a living fortress with ramparts of stout arms and brave, faithful hearts, and behind those human walls the sick and the helpless found a sure safety.

My eyes glistened, my bosom swelled with a fervour of pride: the spectacle intoxicated me. Since then I have witnessed many a grand display, have taken part in many a mad and desperate charge, have fought on the stricken field when the destinies of nations hung trembling on the issue, but never has my heart been so profoundly stirred as on that night when Mackenzie marched out from the shah's shattered fort.

For this was not mere bravery, or a wild, despairing rush for life; it was rather a noble example of that self-sacrificing spirit which has ever distinguished the British soldier.

Against those unbroken ranks the angry sea might hurl its tumultuous billows as it listed, but through them it could never win a way.

Inside, the tiniest child, the weakest woman, the most grievously stricken soldier was at peace, protected by those loyal hearts.

And my place was with that living barrier! I recked not of danger, feeling only a sensation of pride that I too could claim a part in that deed of bravery.

Nearer and nearer marched the troops, until they were opposite the spot where we stood. Perhaps my senses left me for a moment—I do not know—but stripping the blue smock from my shoulders and the loonghee from my head, I dashed at the Afghans in front.

So fierce, so impetuous was the rush that the astonished natives parted right and left, leaving an open space through which I darted with a loud cheer.

At the sight of my semi-military jacket the soldiers, as if understanding the situation, cheered vociferously, and the Afghans responded with a cry of rage.

Meanwhile, hearing my name, I turned to the speaker, Lieutenant Durant, whom I knew well.

"That was a plucky run, Paul ; but I fear, as we used to say at school, you have jumped from the frying-pan into the fire."

"That is the reason for my coming ; I thought you might find even one extra sword useful."

"You're a good fellow, Paul ; you should be one of us—Steady there, men—do not throw your ammunition away ; not a shot must be wasted if we are to get through."

The officer's admonition was scarcely required ; each man moved as if he were some nicely-adjusted part of a machine. There was no unsteadiness or irresolution, no sign of fear or faltering, and, highest gauge of all, no display of impatience.

It was, as Charlie Durant laughingly described it, a "March Home with Variations, composed by Captain Mackenzie, with the kindly assistance of the Cabulese."

Slowly and doggedly we fought our way, step by step, foot by foot, without hurry or confusion, wearing down by sheer pluck and obstinacy the assaults of our foes.

And thus it came about that by the stanch endurance of a handful of wearied men, half faint for lack of water, Captain Mackenzie was enabled, in the teeth of fierce opposition, to take safely into camp his sick and wounded, his women and feeble children.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RIKABASHEE FORT.

HAVING reported myself to Mr. Raymond, I hastened to the bungalow, where Mrs. Gurdon and Sara were anxiously awaiting me.

By some means they had learned of my perilous mission, and as the time passed without bringing news of my return, their anxiety increased.

Thus it was that I found them still unprepared for bed, and truly it seemed to be worth risking much in order to win so warm a welcome as that which now I met with.

Naturally they were eager to hear my adventures, and their eyes sparkled with delight as I related how gallantly the brave Mackenzie had defended his post; and, when that was not possible, how valiantly he had fought his way into cantonments, leaving none behind to the mercies of our Afghan foes.

“But does not this rising begin to assume a very threatening aspect,” asked Mrs. Gurdon — “poor Sir Alexander murdered, the Treasury sacked, and now the shah’s fort compulsorily abandoned? Surely these successes will inspire the Afghans with a strong belief in their own

omnipotence. What measures are we taking to recover our lost prestige ? ”

Now this was a question which it was difficult to answer, since I knew of none, and my reply was therefore vague and unsatisfactory.

“Do you think they will venture to attack us here ? ” Sara asked.

“No,” I answered, smiling confidently ; “we shall be spared that indignity. And now, perhaps, I had better bid you farewell. The sun will soon be high in the heavens, and you have not yet rested.”

“I trust there are to be no more secret excursions,” remarked Mrs. Gurdon, as she shook my hand. “Remember, we are in no hurry to lose our only champion.”

“Good-night, Paul, or rather good-morning,” said Sara, in her turn. “I fear we have been selfish in keeping you up after your exertions, but our anxiety must form our excuse.”

“I would not have you anxious, yet it is pleasant to know that some one cares for my welfare,” I replied, and with a gentle pressure of the girl’s hand I turned away.

By this time the wave of excitement was running too strongly for me to think of sleep, and having nothing in particular to do, I strolled toward a group of officers, amongst whom was Reginald Pole.

“Welcome, Paul,” he said frankly ; “I understand you have been making good use of your opportunities. Charlie Durant has been raising quite a feeling of envy by his account of your prowess, and I hear that Mackenzie has mentioned your name in his official report.”

"Mr. Clevely should become one of us; his talents are thrown away as a civilian," another added good-naturedly.

"He could not join at a better time; there will soon be plenty of promotion in all branches of the service. By the way, young Warren has reported himself in danger of being cut off."

"Is he to be reinforced?"

"Nothing decided yet.—Oh! here comes Stanley, and not in the best of humours, judging by his looks."

The new-comer was instantly surrounded by his brother-officers, eager to learn what orders had been issued, and an involuntary cry of surprise escaped the lips of more than one at the information he brought.

Warren and his sepoy were to be brought off, and the commissariat fort with all its contents was to be abandoned.

This was indeed a startling piece of news, inasmuch as nearly the whole of our provisions were stored there. If we lost the commissariat fort, whence should we draw our future supplies?

Now it became patent to every one how grievous an error had been committed in placing the stores in such an exposed position—outside the cantonments, and commanded by two forts, Mohammed Shereef's and Mahmoud Khan's, each of which was occupied by the Afghans in strong force. Indeed so firmly intrenched were they, and in such an admirable situation, that it was found impossible to execute the general's orders, though many brave men died in the attempt.

Twice during the day I paid a brief visit to the ladies,

and upon returning to camp for the second time perceived that preparations of a commanding character were being made for a fresh attack.

The depression which during the day had gradually settled on the men's spirits appeared to have worn off. Every one was eager, excited, and buoyant.

"What has happened?" I asked Pole, who responded cheerfully,—

"Fresh instructions: we are to reinforce Warren and keep the fort. If he can manage to hold out a few hours longer, all will yet be well."

"That is pleasant hearing. When do you make the attempt?"

"At the first streak of dawn. I expect there will be warm work; but the men need a fillip, and a victory just now will go far towards restoring their confidence in themselves."

"Yes," I assented, "a successful brush with the enemy at the present time would be invaluable."

In a short while, however, our pleasing anticipations were destined to be rudely shattered.

Being desirous of witnessing the departure of the troops, I gladly accepted Lieutenant Pole's invitation to remain with him until they marched.

All this time a brisk cannonade was being sustained from Mohammed Shereef's fort, and once or twice we heard a heavy sound, as if something had been blown up.

"The Afghans are on good terms with themselves," remarked my companion. "Capturing a half-crazy fort and

murdering a handful of sepoy's has turned their brains. However, they will dance to another tune in an hour or two. Listen ! there is the signal to fall in ; I must go."

In the south-west angle of the cantonments the troops were rapidly taking up the positions assigned to them, when suddenly we became conscious of a noise as of men running, and to the surprise of all, Warren, followed by his sepoy's, made his appearance.

As far as could be ascertained in the confusion, what had occurred was this :—

Ever since the beginning of the outbreak, the little garrison had been subjected to a galling and overwhelming fire from the two adjacent Afghan forts, and from the enclosed grounds of the Shah Bagh, or King's Garden.

Recognizing how inadequate his force was to cope with these vigorous assaults, the officer in command had sent word of his danger to the general, and had witnessed the subsequent unsuccessful efforts to relieve him.

Concerning the alteration in the general's plans he appeared to know nothing. No message, he said, had reached him. He was in utter ignorance of the reinforcements, even then drawn up, ready to march to his assistance.

All day long, and far into the night, the hot fire had been maintained ; the gate had been blown down ; the fort was no longer tenable ; no aid was forthcoming from cantonments ; to remain was simply exposing the men to useless slaughter, and he resolved to cut his way through to the camp.

This loss of the commissariat fort was the heaviest blow

yet dealt us. In cantonments we had not sufficient food for more than two days, with little prospect of obtaining a fresh supply.

Thus within three days were we reduced from a position of proud supremacy almost to a state of siege, for which we were totally unprepared.

In a short time we should be living, as a well-known phrase graphically expresses it, "from hand to mouth," dependent for supplies upon what could be obtained by force or by treaty from our Afghan foes.

Moreover, these successive reverses were not without effect upon the spirits of the men, who began to ask each other how it would all end.

With each day, too, nay, almost with each hour, the natives became more and more aggressive.

As I have before mentioned, the cantonments were badly situated, and ill designed for defensive purposes. The rectangular space enclosed by the hastily-constructed walls was far too vast in extent to be properly guarded, and was besides surrounded by walled gardens, hilly ground, and numerous well-furnished forts.

From these last the Afghans, emboldened by success, now began to pour a close and telling fire, keeping a portion of our men fully occupied both day and night.

To add to these misfortunes, our general, a brave old soldier, was seriously ill, and incapacitated through weakness from vigorously directing affairs.

The younger men, hot-blooded and impulsive, chafed and fumed privately against this state of inaction.

"Why on earth we are kept here doing nothing passes my comprehension," observed Pole one morning at Mrs. Gurdon's.

"What do you think ought to be done?" Sara asked.

"I'll tell you how I should act were I in command, Miss Gurdon. I would throw all the non-combatants into the Bala Hissar under a strong guard, meet the natives in a pitched battle, hang the ringleaders, and blow up a few of the principal buildings. Depend upon it there would be little further rioting."

"A capital programme, but just a little difficult to put into execution," remarked one of his friends. "However, I must confess it would please me if the ladies were safely lodged in the Bala Hissar.—What is your opinion, Mr. Clevely?"

"Well, of course, being merely a civilian, I am not qualified to judge. Still, the fortress must afford greater security than this exposed place. But unless we speedily strike some sharp decisive blow, our difficulties will be immensely augmented. Let the natives once suspect their strength and our weakness, and every man in the country will become an enemy."

"Did I not understand that Brigadier Shelton had come in?" Mrs. Gurdon asked.

"Yes, that is so; the big-wigs are holding a conference now. Let us hope they will decide upon the occupation of the Bala Hissar."

After the others had gone Sara said,—

"Do you think the danger is really serious, Paul?"

"Oh no! the situation is rather annoying than dangerous. We could hold the Bala Hissar against all the fanatics in the East."

"But papa was strongly under the impression that we should never make use of the fortress."

"His opinion was formed under happier circumstances. Now, with the country in open revolt, I cannot see what other course lies open to our leaders."

"Have you heard any rumour concerning the return of the 13th?" Mrs. Gurdon interposed. "Is it correct that Sir Robert's force has been recalled?"

"I do not think the message amounts to a positive command. I believe that information as to the state of things here has been sent to Sir Robert, but the question of returning will be left to his judgment."

The face of my hostess brightened, and she smiled cheerfully at the thought that even now her gallant husband's steps might be turned towards Cabul.

That night there was but little sleep for any one in the cantonments. From all the adjacent forts the Afghans poured in a heavy and effective fire, which our gunners were unable to subdue.

Hitherto the cannonade had been chiefly directed from the forts lying between the cantonments and the city, but now the natives occupied those which unfortunately had been left standing to the north-east.

One of them, called the Rikabashee Fort, was within a distance of a few hundred yards, close to the canal, and almost immediately opposite the mission compound.

An Afghan in the envoy's employ had sent word privately that, under cover of a heavy fire from this stronghold, the natives intended making a determined assault upon the camp, and in consequence a strict watch was ordered to be kept.

The night was bitterly cold; even the British officers and soldiers shivered, while the sufferings of the poor sepoy were most painful.

I was standing near the wall, thinking sadly of the unexpected turn of affairs, when Charlie Durant approached.

"You are just the man I have been seeking," he exclaimed. "Cadett told me you were here. Are you ready for another adventure? I am in want of a comrade."

"What is it? Are you commissioned to blow up the fort?"

"Oh no, nothing so exciting. But it appears as if our friends yonder have changed their minds, and I have orders to reconnoitre and report."

"The walk will restore circulation," I said, as we moved toward the gate. "I feel half frozen."

My companion laughed softly.

"We shall be warm enough before getting back. Keep a sharp look-out; there may be others besides ourselves on the prowl."

We crept along cautiously in the darkness toward the fort, until we arrived close to the walls. The artillery fire had slackened considerably, but an occasional flash, throwing the dusky battlements into relief, made it patent that

the gunners had not left their pieces. Still there were no signs of the meditated attack. In the Rikabashee fort itself, save for a shot now and then at irregular intervals, all was silent, while from those further removed there came no sound of any description.

“There will be no fighting to-night,” my comrade whispered. “Let us return; our fellows can go to sleep for an hour or two in peace. Listen! what is that? By Jove, we are in a hornet’s nest. Run, Paul; run for your life!”

By this time we had penetrated to the rear of the fort, and as I turned to follow the lieutenant’s advice, a score of shadowy figures flung themselves across my path.

In an instant there was a wild uproar. “The Feringhees! kill, kill!” responded from all sides. We were in a ring, from which there was no outlet save across the bodies of our foes.

“Your pistols, Paul,” my companion shouted, and he fired point-blank at a tall form close to us.

The Afghan fell with a groan, and a shot from my pistol wounding another almost at the same moment, the rest wavered. Drawing our swords we made a rush, and before they could recover, had burst through and past them.

Luckily the distance to be traversed was not great, otherwise our adventure would have had a tragic termination. But fleet of foot as the Afghans were, they could not live the pace which we set, and contented themselves with accelerating our flight by a brisk fire from their jezails.

This, owing to the darkness of the night and the uneven surface of the ground, proved ineffectual, and we reached the gate unharmed.

"I fancy you are warm enough now," Charlie said, with a laugh, as we re-entered the enclosure. "I would advise you to go straight to bed. There will be no attack, and you cannot afford to take cold. I am going to make my report. Good-night."

As there was really nothing further to be done, I sought my bed, and was soon fast asleep.

The day passed without the occurrence of any noteworthy incident; but on the following morning the annoyance from the nearest fort increased to such an extent that it was resolved at all hazards to drive the enemy out.

For this purpose Brigadier Shelton, with the 44th Regiment, the 37th Native Infantry, and detachments from several other corps, marched from the cantonments towards the Rikabashee fort.

The distance being so short, we who were left behind had a full view of all that happened. The Afghans, exhibiting no trace of alarm, kept up a murderous fire upon the advancing troops, who, however, presented a firm front.

Suddenly Durant, who was standing next to me and looking through a field-glass, cried,—

"They have made a mistake: that is not the gate, but the kirkee."

"Never mind; it's a way in at all events. There's the signal for stormers."

“And they’re answering it, too,” responded Charlie enthusiastically. “In they go. I would gladly forfeit a step to be with those brave fellows. There’s Colonel Mackrell, and Bird of the shah’s, and another 44th man. See, there go several of the 37th. Those sepoy fight well, and no mistake. Hurrah! the fort is ours. Give them a cheer, my lads.”

But our gratification was short-lived. Directly after the handful of stormers had forced their way through the little wicket, a body of Afghan cavalry made a desperate dash at the troops outside. So furious was the onset, so wild, and above all so unexpected, that the 44th wavered and broke.

We stood gazing intently, fascinated by the painful spectacle. For a few minutes the suspense was sickening. Would they really run, leaving their comrades inside the fort to be massacred?

We could see the officers waving their swords and endeavouring to rally the men.

“Thank God! the brigadier has them in hand,” cried Charlie fervently. “He is putting himself at the head of the stormers. There will be no more hanging back. The natives will never stand against that.”

But they did, and displayed the most desperate bravery into the bargain. Manfully they stood their ground, giving blow for blow, and dying with the utmost fortitude.

The brigadier, however, was not to be gainsaid. Slowly yet surely he pushed the Afghans back, the bayonets of his men doing fearful execution. In vain the

gallant tribesmen rallied; vainly they pressed round their standards, offering a strenuous opposition, or cast themselves headlong upon the gleaming lines of steel. They could make no impression upon the ranks of their assailants.

At last we saw Shelton steady his men for the final rush, and a loud cheer went up as they swept into the fort, driving the beaten Afghans before them.

"They are leaving the other forts and retreating to the hills," Charlie said excitedly. "The brigadier intends following up his advantage. Eyre is taking the horse-artillery in pursuit. I wonder if any of the first storming party escaped from the fort. Come, Paul, let us go down to the gate. I fear your friend Saunders and his colleagues will be busy."

Sadly we watched the mournful procession from the fort, as the bearers brought in the bodies of those who had fallen in the struggle.

One of the most grievously wounded was Colonel Mackrell, the leader of the stormers, and it made my heart ache to see him, so numerous and ghastly were his hurts.

It was impossible to gather any authentic information as to what had taken place inside the fort, as the one or two who had been rescued were already at the point of death.

A private of the 44th, who had been cut down in the second attack, stated that Lieutenant Bird had escaped; but it was not until the return of the victorious troops at nightfall that we heard the details of the unfortunate incident.

Despite our losses, we felt well pleased with the day's success, and heartily cheered the men as they came into cantonments after chasing the enemy beyond the Seah Sung hills.

"There's Rex," said Charlie Durant, pointing to Lieutenant Pole. "A lucky chap that; always in the thick of every fight, and never gets a scratch.—Well, Rex, my boy, so you have come out all right once more."

"Sound as an acorn, but with a hunter's appetite. Running up and down those hills makes one ravenous. The men, too, are starving; they have worked hard. But you shall have the particulars later on. Where shall I find you?"

"At Mrs. Gurdon's. We have strict orders to report at once upon your safety or otherwise."

"My compliments to the ladies," he said; "I will be with them shortly."

After exchanging a few words with several others of our acquaintance, we proceeded to the bungalow, where, as speedily as his duties permitted, Rex joined us.

"I know you are all eager to hear the story," he began, after replying to the congratulations of Mrs. Gurdon and Sara, "but virtually there is little to tell. You saw that Bellew unfortunately blew in the kirkee instead of the gate. Still the stormers obeyed the signal, and rushed at the opening, through which about a dozen of them forced a way. Then came the unexpected cavalry charge, and the business began to wear a very dark look; but fortunately for us the brigadier kept cool, and rallied his men

beautifully. At the second time of asking they went with a will, and although the Afghans fought stubbornly enough, we drove them back. Since then we have been engaged in chasing them to their post on the Seah Sung hills, where Eyre gave them a striking object-lesson in horse-artillery practice. I fancy some considerable time will pass before they trouble us again."

"But what of our poor fellows who were left in the fort?"

The young soldier's brow clouded.

"Ah! that is the one blot on our success. We lost three good officers there. Westmacott and MacCrea were killed outside, and Colonel Mackrell, I hear, has just expired. Bird of the shah's and one sepoy escaped, and in the most marvellous manner. It appears that when our men entered they drove the Afghans out through the opposite gate, which Bird closed, fastening the chain with a bayonet. Up to that point all had gone well; but the natives, taking heart at the success of their cavalry, reformed, and got the gate open again. Bird, accompanied by the sepoy, retreated to a stable, which they barricaded, and this post they maintained until our entrance. I shall not readily forget the sight. The space outside the stable was literally a hill of dead bodies, of which I myself counted more than thirty."

"Let us hope the lesson will not be wasted," observed Charlie. "By the way, there is some further talk of occupying the Bala Hissar. Captain Walker has been ordered to convoy ammunition thither."

"I am afraid the news is too good to be true. For my part, I cannot see why we were not there a long time ago," Mrs. Gurdon said.

I noticed with pain that the events of the last few days, coupled with anxiety concerning the captain's welfare, were telling severely upon our amiable hostess, although she strove hard to preserve her cheerful manner.

But in face of the difficulties which were gradually encompassing us, it was not an easy matter to cultivate high spirits; and in spite of the recent success, our farewells later on were of rather a gloomy character.

Nor was my sense of safety increased by the receipt of a note which, after my comrades had retired to their quarters, was handed to me by a camp-follower, to whom it had been given by a *cossid* or messenger, with instructions to deliver it to *Clevely Sahib*.

It contained only a few Persian characters, and was unsigned, but I knew that the writer must be *Umran Khan*.

It ran thus:—

"You neglected my first warning, but, by the grace of Allah, I am permitted to give you a second. If you would avoid the doom which awaits the *Feringhees*, take this paper to *Raza Meer*, in the *Kuzilbash* quarter. He will guard you with his life."

Grateful as I felt toward my strange friend, it is perhaps needless to mention that before retiring to rest I committed the paper to the flames.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

MANY times during the next few days I thought of the chivalrous Afghan who was so anxious to save my life, and wondered, if affairs really became desperate, whether I could not use his kindness on behalf of Mrs. Gurdon and Sara.

After all, I had acted perhaps too precipitately in destroying the note. I did not mention the incident to the ladies, but a night or two afterwards I related to Lieutenant Pole what had occurred.

He was on duty in Mohammed Shereef's fort, with a detachment made up of soldiers from the 44th and 37th regiments.

The night was unusually quiet, a few badly-aimed shots from the Shah Bagh being the only disturbers of our peace.

"The natives seem disposed to allow us a little rest," my companion said; "or is it but a ruse to allay our suspicions?"

"I wish we could think the revolt was breaking up, Rex," I exclaimed moodily; "to speak truth, this is be-

coming rather wearisome. Have you heard the rumours from Charikar?"

"Yes; but I do not place much faith in them. I rather look upon the story as an invention of the enemy. But surely *your* heart is not beginning to fail?"

"Not for myself, but I dread to think of what may happen to those delicately-nurtured ladies, unless something is speedily done. Besides, I have been warned to expect the worst," and I told him of Umran Khan's counsel.

"It looks serious," he admitted, reflectively; "but, on the other hand, it may be simply a trick to get you into his power. Remember, he has no reason to regard you with favour."

I did not deny the cogency of this argument, but nevertheless it did not affect my belief in Umran's honesty; that he really meant me well I felt assured, and said so.

"Then this Khyberree chief is a very gallant enemy," Rex remarked.

"But he will fight us to the death notwithstanding, and show no mercy; his friendship is individual—it does not extend to the British as a whole."

"Now that is extremely curious; one of the Cabulese chiefs made an exactly similar observation to me a day or two before the rising.—Well, sergeant," he broke off, as a non-commissioned officer stepped up and saluted, "anything amiss?"

"No, sir, but there's an Afghan at the gate, as cool as you please, asking for Mr. Clevely. We fired a few shots at him as he came up, but he didn't seem to mind a bit.

He is a plucky chap, and no mistake," with a soldier's hearty appreciation of bravery, whether displayed by friend or foe.

"Is he alone?"

"Yes, sir, and has a splendid horse. I should say that he is an officer high up."

"Is he a big, tall man, sergeant?" I interposed.

"Yes, sir, a regular giant."

"It must be Umran," I said to Rex excitedly.

The lieutenant looked thoughtful. "This is rather awkward, Paul," he observed at length; "we cannot permit him to enter the fort."

"But there is no objection to my going out. I should like to see him."

"Are you not afraid of treachery?"

"Not in the least; I tell you Umran will do me no harm."

My friend still hesitated, but finding that his warnings did not lessen my confidence, he finally gave his consent to the interview.

As I expected, the visitor proved to be Umran, who showed his satisfaction at this display of trust in his honour.

"How did you discover my whereabouts?" I asked, and the answer was far from reassuring.

"Has the sahib so soon forgotten the words which fell from my lips? The Feringhees can conceal nothing from us. We know their strength and their weakness; even the thoughts of their hearts are not hidden from us. But

enough of that ; the night passes, and I must return. Did my message arrive in safety ? ”

“ It did, and my thanks are due to you for such generous kindness.”

“ Nevertheless my effort will be of no avail ? ”

I shook my head sorrowfully. “ It cannot be, Umran ; life is too dearly bought at the expense of honour. Yet there is one question I would fain ask. If, as you profess to believe, Allah has delivered us into your hands, what will be the fate of those dearer to me than life ? Yonder in the cantonments are two ladies whose welfare is very precious to me. Is it beyond the power of the Khyberee chief to throw the mantle of his protection over them ? ”

We were pacing to and fro, my companion leading his horse by the bridle, but at this question he stopped abruptly.

“ I make no profession of friendship toward the Feringhees,” he said sternly, “ and, moreover, my influence is limited. Amongst the Kuzilbashes I can hide you, because you know our ways, and our speech falls readily from your lips. But how can I prevent the knives of the fierce Ghilzais from leaping at the throats of the Feringhee women ? I shall be far away, giving the bodies of their husbands and brothers to the dogs. Have you not heard of that which has happened at Charikar ? ”

“ The Pushtaneh have been trying to frighten us with some idle tales,” I answered evasively.

“ The tales are true ; all the chief sahibs are dead, and their men dispersed. Some have taken service with us ;

others are wandering up and down the country, waiting for death to end their sufferings."

I endeavoured not to let him perceive how much this information disconcerted me, and turned the conversation back to my appeal on behalf of Sara and her mother.

On this point, however, I could obtain no satisfactory assurances. Either from indifference, or from a genuine distrust of his ability to aid them, he would promise nothing, and at length we parted with mutual expressions of good-will.

"That will be a nasty blow," said the lieutenant when I told him Umran's story, "but I cannot altogether believe in it."

"I have never yet known my informant to be wrongly advised," I answered moodily; "still we need not abandon all hope without definite proof."

Alas! at that very moment there were creeping wearily through the streets of Cabul two men, wounded nigh unto death, the sole British survivors of our force in the country of the Kohistanees.

But of this melancholy fact we were as yet happily ignorant, and while so many of our gallant comrades lay cold in death, we continued placidly discussing the probability of their safety.

The first words of the officer who came from cantonments to relieve Lieutenant Pole were sufficient to dispel the hopes to which we still clung.

"There is ill news in camp," he said gloomily. "I did not learn the details, but Pottinger and Haughton have

come in. They are in a fearful state. Haughton has lost one hand, and is slashed all over ; it is marvellous that he still lives."

"Where are Codrington and the others?"

"Nothing has leaked out yet, save a rumour to the effect that the Ghoorkas have mutinied."

We did not lose much time after this speech, but hurried at once to the camp, where Durant met us.

"I have been awaiting your return," he said, "in order to warn you not to alarm Mrs. Gurdon by telling more than is necessary about this ghastly business."

"What has happened?" Rex asked; "we know nothing except that Pottinger and Haughton have come in. Where are the others?"

"Dead!"

We started in dismay, and Durant continued sorrowfully:

"It is an ugly business, and I greatly fear will prove the heaviest blow yet dealt us. It is difficult to find out exactly what has happened, but I can give you a rough outline of the story. You know Pottinger's headquarters were at Lughmanee. Incited by the news of the successful revolt here, the chiefs broke out into open hostility, with the result that Pottinger was driven to the cantonments at Charikar. Here the Afghans turned up in force. Codrington was killed, and the Ghoorka regiment driven into barracks. Some of us complain of our quarters here, but the poor fellows at Charikar were in even sorrier plight, as they were without water. During the last four days each man received one wineglassful per diem, and

then it was all exhausted. Meantime fighting went on day and night; but on the tenth Haughton was cut down by his own men, and half the regiment deserted in a body. Our fellows stuck gamely to their posts until the night of the thirteenth, and then rode out in the darkness. Pottinger and Haughton led the advance, with Dr. Grant and poor young Rose following. Somehow the first two got separated from the others, and have not seen them since."

"Then they may still be alive," I suggested cheerfully.

"No," Durant exclaimed; "I cannot perceive the slightest sign of hope. Exhausted by their wounds, faint from loss of sleep and lack of water, mounted on half-famished animals, how could they pass through a country swarming with fierce fanatics?"

"I tell you what it is, Charlie," said Rex: "if matters do not soon improve, the Charikar disaster will be repeated at Cabul, only on a larger scale."

"I believe that thoroughly, but we must not air our opinions in public. We must keep a brave face before the men; they will need all their courage ere long."

"I suppose the news of this last calamity has spread throughout the camp?"

"The broad facts, but not the details! However, it will be impossible to conceal the story for long."

At the bungalow I found that Durant's news had preceded me, and the ladies were naturally anxious to learn the full particulars; but bearing his warning in mind, I dwelt as lightly as possible on the unfortunate disaster.

Before night, too, information of another character provided them with fresh food for thought, and diverted their attention into a different channel. During the afternoon Charlie brought the intelligence that a cossid had arrived in camp, bearing dispatches from Sir Robert Sale, and I immediately hurried over to the mission offices, in order to collect any news concerning Captain Gurdon.

The nature of the messages was not allowed to transpire, but Mr. Raymond assured me that the captain was still unhurt, and that, so far as he knew, no harm had happened to Lieutenant Brader.

This was extremely satisfactory; but my pleasure was tempered by the tidings, hinted at rather than directly conveyed, that Sir Robert's brigade was on its march to Jelalabad.

This at once put an end to the hope in which we had been indulging, that Sir Robert would fight his way back through the passes, and rescue us from our perilous position.

Henceforward that idea was crushed, and we knew now that should it prove impossible to work out our own salvation, we were doomed.

However, Brader and the captain were safe, and with this assurance I repaired to the bungalow.

"You bring good news," exclaimed Mrs. Gurdon, rapidly scanning my features; "no harm has happened to my dear husband."

"You are a true prophetess: both the captain and our Shakespearian friend are well."

"Are they coming back?" asked Sara anxiously. "But no; I see by your face they are not."

"The dispatches have not yet been made public, so nothing is definitely known," I answered diplomatically.

"Still, in your opinion, there is little room for doubt?"

The clear blue eyes looked steadfastly into mine, forcing me, greatly against my inclination, to crush out any feeble spark of hope which might yet lie latent in the girl's breast.

"To speak truth, Sara, I do not think Sir Robert will return; and indeed I scarcely know why we should wish it. He could not force the passes without terrible loss, and we are quite strong enough to hold our own without the assistance of his brigade."

"If we were in the Bala Hissar, I should be inclined to your view, Paul," Mrs. Gurdon interposed, "but this rambling place affords no protection whatever."

"It is quite likely that we shall shortly remove from our present quarters to the fortress," I remarked; "the idea has been recently revived, and this very night I am going on an errand which may have some connection with the design."

Sara's face grew pale, and she said tremblingly,—

"Are you going into danger again, Paul? Surely you are not about to venture your life once more in that horrid city?"

I laughed lightly. It was very sweet to me to learn how greatly this beautiful maiden was interested in my welfare.

"Have no fear, Sara," I said; "there is not the slightest risk. Captain Walker is taking his company to the Bala Hissar with ammunition, and I am to go with him for the purpose of delivering a note to one of our native friends. The expedition is nothing more than a comfortable ride to the fortress and back."

Laying her delicate hand on my arm, the girl said earnestly,—

"Paul, do not run needlessly into danger. I know how brave you are, brave even to rashness; but remember my mother and I have no friend but you, now that dear papa is so far away."

"I will be careful, Sara, for your sakes; but you would not have me show the white feather, would you? Besides, there is no actual peril; it is not like the expedition to Cabul. Walker will take a large escort, and his men, if attacked, will give a good account of themselves."

"But why should your services be required? I do not understand."

"The explanation is simple. Rao Singh, the friendly native, is well known to me—in fact it is the same person who saved my life on the day of the rising—and you can easily see how essential it is that the envoy's note should reach the right hands."

"I wish you were not going, nevertheless," she answered. "I fear I am becoming very fanciful."

Again I pointed out how little real danger existed, and by the time it became necessary to say farewell, I had the

satisfaction of knowing that she was much more reconciled to the idea of my errand.

"Good-bye," I exclaimed cheerily; "long before you are stirring in the morning I shall have returned to camp."

They shook me warmly by the hand, and stood at the door watching as I walked slowly in the direction of the mission compound. Mr. Raymond was awaiting my arrival, in order to give me the final instructions.

"The matter is perfectly straightforward," he said, "and you cannot go wrong if Rao Singh keeps his promise. You will ride with the escort until within a quarter of a mile of the Bala Hissar, where on the right hand side of the road is a disused fort. Should Rao Singh be there, give him this note, and bring me back either a message or missive from him, but on no account are you to give the letter into the hands of any other person. Should you be in danger of capture, destroy the paper at once. Have I made my meaning clear?"

"Perfectly; I will not fail you."

This was by no means Captain Walker's first night journey to the Bala Hissar, and hitherto his most serious casualties amounted to no more than the loss of a few horses and one or two men.

I joined the horsemen at the gate, and the order to march was instantly given. To prevent our movements being detected by any of the natives who might be lurking around, the strictest silence was preserved, and not a word was uttered save now and then a whispered command from the leader.

For once, however, this eminently wise precaution did not appear to be needed, as we reached the ruined fort without molestation.

Here the captain halted his troop, while I approached the fort in order to reconnoitre. The place was apparently deserted, and my signal met with no response.

"Rao Singh is late, but your march must not be delayed by his procrastination," I observed. "I will remain in the fort until your return."

"Are your pistols in order?" Captain Walker asked significantly; "because, as a matter of fact, I place but little reliance on the word of these natives."

"Rao Singh's loyalty is beyond question, I have no fear. Probably he has experienced a difficulty in stealing out from the city unperceived. Still, treachery or not, my duty compels me to remain, at least until your return."

"Well, good luck. You may count upon my not allowing the grass to grow under the horses' feet."

I watched them ride away, and then, tethering my horse securely and out of sight, I entered the fort.

That Rao Singh might prove untrustworthy did not enter my head; he was too deeply committed. Still this lonely vigil was far from pleasing, and a score of times during the first ten minutes I heartily wished it at an end.

I stood motionless in a corner of the lower room, my back against the wall, my fingers closed round the trigger of my pistol, listening eagerly for the sound of a footstep.

Suddenly from somewhere above my head came very

softly the appointed signal, and without shifting my position or relaxing the hold on my weapon, I imitated the cry.

For a moment there was silence, and then I heard my name in a whisper.

"I am here, Rao Singh. Come quickly; the time is short."

"A moment longer and I will be with you."

There was a muffled sound as of naked feet descending the crazy steps which led from the wrecked upper chamber, and Rao Singh stood before me.

"Allah be praised!" he ejaculated fervently. "Give me the sahib's note. I fear that my footsteps have been dogged by a party of Kohistanees."

I delivered the note, which he perused eagerly by the aid of a light.

"Tell the sahib," he said, "that the plan will not answer, and moreover his designs are known. There are those who eat his salt and betray him before the going down of the sun. Repeat this as falling from the lips of Rao Singh: 'The wise man will imprison his words in the presence of a Hazir-Bash.'"

"Listen!" I said cautiously: "that was the neigh of a horse, and not of mine. Did you come on foot?"

"Yes!" and he clutched my arm.

Just then we heard the report of a matchlock, probably discharged by accident in the darkness, and this was followed by a rush as of many feet.

"We are surrounded," my companion exclaimed. "But

a good fox never seeks shelter in a blind burrow. Follow me."

Crossing the room lightly, he knelt on the floor, groping with his hands, while I stood by wonderingly.

Meantime the noise of the foes sounded nearer and more distinctly; it was patent that they were now close to the entrance.

Rao Singh did not raise his head, but continuing at his strange task whispered,—

"Shoot, sahib, directly they enter, and bring down a man with every bullet. Two minutes more and their prey will have escaped them."

One, two, three, the seconds passed; I counted them mechanically, while my heart beat fast, and I gazed as if fascinated at the broken door.

Would my companion never finish his mysterious labours? I could hear him gasping for breath as he strained and tugged at some object beneath him, but I dared not turn to ascertain if he were making any progress.

"Hasten, Rao Singh," I urged; "they are here," and even as the words passed my lips the entrance-way was blocked by half a dozen burly forms.

Bang! There was a flash of light, and my bullet sped truly into the midst of the group.

The wounded man, uttering a cry of pain, fell heavily to the ground, while his comrades stood frightened and irresolute. Without affording them time to recover from their confusion, I fired again, and a second groan testified to the accuracy of my shooting.

At the same moment Rao Singh shouted excitedly,—

“Down the steps, sahib; the way is open,” and he drew me toward him.

The object of his exertions now became obvious. I could just distinguish a small aperture in the ground, and grasping the edge firmly, I felt with my feet for the steps.

Rao Singh swung himself down lightly, and handing me his pistol, turned to rearrange the trap-door, which was apparently a stone slab, turning upon a pivot.

He was barely in time. As the stone settled slowly into its former position, the Kohistanees rushed across the room toward the spot where we had disappeared.

“Now, sahib,” whispered my companion in flight, “lean against the wall while I pass you. We must hurry; should they discover the outlet before we reach it, our doom is sealed.”

At the bottom of the steps we entered a narrow passage, dark, cold, and evil-smelling, but of sufficient height and width to enable us to travel easily.

Once Rao Singh paused and listened intently, but nothing was to be heard: manifestly our pursuers had failed to raise the slab.

After traversing about a quarter of a mile the ground began to ascend rather abruptly, making it difficult for us to preserve our foothold, but presently the increasing chilliness of the atmosphere warned me that we were approaching the end of the subterranean passage.

Rao Singh now proceeded with greater caution, and

suddenly stopped, extending his hands as if to remove some obstacle from his path.

"Come!" he said; and following him closely, I stepped out from the tunnel, the entrance to which was completely concealed by a thick clump of gorse.

The native pointed in the direction of the cantonments.

"Now the sahib is safe; yonder lies the road," he exclaimed exultingly.

"You forget the troopers," I answered. "If the Kohistanees linger at the fort, my friends will meet with a warm reception."

"No harm will happen to them, they are many," he said philosophically; "the sahib is but one."

Nevertheless I could not bring myself to proceed to cantonments without warning Captain Walker; so having bidden adieu to Rao Singh, who quickly vanished, I started back in the direction of the fort, taking care to avoid the open road. Availing myself of every bit of cover, I stole along cautiously but rapidly, until once more I approached within a few yards of the ruin. By going a little out of the direct way I could have steered clear of the fort altogether, but I was anxious to regain possession of my horse, which was a valuable animal.

Judging by the silence, the enemy had vanished; but I did not altogether relax my caution, and crept up stealthily to the animal's hiding-place. To my great joy I found him standing quietly, and quickly mounting, I rode down into the road, congratulating myself upon such an easy escape.

But I reckoned, as the phrase goes, without my host.

With a savage yell a score of figures darted out; a dozen bullets whistled unpleasantly near my head, and immediately afterwards the clatter of horses' hoofs warned me that the Kohistanees were in fierce pursuit.

The chase was exciting while it lasted, but a bend in the road brought me face to face with the returning troopers, and all danger was over.

Captain Walker took in the situation at a glance, and rejoicing at the opportunity thus afforded of a brush with the enemy, gave his men the order to charge, himself leading the way.

Taken thus at a disadvantage, the Kohistanees scattered right and left, galloping their horses madly over the uneven ground, where it would have been futile, if not dangerous, for the troopers to follow.

"Well," said the captain to me, when he had recalled his men, "so Rao Singh turned out a fraud after all."

"No, he is not to blame," I replied; "but we have had a narrow escape," and as we jogged on toward the camp I related the story of our adventures.

"Rao Singh is a wily old fox," remarked the captain at the conclusion; "I trust he has got safely away. But here we are at the gate, and Mr. Raymond stands yonder waiting for you."

"Yes: he is no doubt anxious to learn the result of my mission. Good-night; I shall not be sorry to obtain an hour's sleep." And after delivering Rao Singh's message to my chief, I went straight to bed.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DESPERATE FIGHT.

TWO or three days passed after my adventure with the Kohistanees in the ruined fort, and we still remained in a state of inaction, while the outlook became more and more gloomy.

Even upon the most sanguine it slowly dawned that, incredible as the fact might appear, we were gradually losing the power to cope with our savage and determined enemies.

Unfortunately, too, the knowledge spread that we could not hope for assistance from our comrades until after the lapse of many weary months. With the exception of our own force, the only troops throughout the country were those under the command of General Nott at Candahar and the brigade which Sir Robert Sale had marched to Jelalabad, and from neither quarter could succour be expected.

Upon ourselves alone depended any chance of safety, and each succeeding day found us more helpless.

From the time when the Afghans captured the commissariat fort our supplies had been most precarious, and

obtained only with infinite trouble. Already the men had been placed upon half-rations, and it seemed as if even that scanty allowance must be soon reduced.

About half a mile to the north of the cantonments is a range of hills called the Behmaroo Heights, and lying at the base of the north-east slope is the village of Behmaroo, from which we had been in the habit of drawing the major portion of our provisions.

Now, however, the Afghans, growing bolder, threw a body of fighting-men into the village, while dense swarms of Ghilzais lined the hills.

"Look!" exclaimed Lieutenant Pole one morning in the early dawn, as we strolled along near the ramparts; "do you know what that signifies?"

"Starvation or abject surrender, unless we drive them off," I answered. "I cannot say that the sight grieves me much, since it must needs hasten the crisis."

"You are right," he said, with a strange fierceness: "better a thousand times to die fighting bravely for the old flag, than to hang about here like a parcel of women."

"Why this sudden outburst, Rex?" asked a cheery voice; and turning, we beheld Charlie Durant.

Rex laughed.

"Perhaps the remark was a trifle high-flown, but the sight of those impudent beggars roused my ire."

"Never mind, we are going to clear them away; at least I understand that Swayne has been ordered to take out a detachment for that purpose."

"It does not become me to criticize a military manœuvre,"

I interposed ; " but will you kindly explain what a detachment can effect against that host ? "

" I'm sure I don't know ; give me something easier."

" Paul is right," Rex said. " In my opinion, we should march out, horse, foot, and artillery, and stake the issue on the result of a pitched battle."

" Leaving the women and other non-combatants defenceless meanwhile ? "

" We could spare a sufficient guard for their protection, and still have a force strong enough to dispose of these gentlemen."

" Give me an invitation when the programme is completed," I remarked laughingly ; " time hangs heavily on my hands just now," and leaving the young officers together, I walked on to find Mr. Raymond.

Charlie Durant's information proved correct. A detachment was sent out during the day ; but the leader, finding his force too weak, wisely returned.

Upon leaving the bungalow at night I encountered Rex, who was in a high state of excitement.

" What has happened ? " I asked curiously, as Rex linking his arm in mine led me away.

" Do you remember my remark this morning about ' horse, foot, and artillery ' ? You were listening to an unconscious prophecy. Shelton is going to take out a strong force at daybreak. By this time to-morrow I trust we shall have struck a decisive blow."

" Which, I presume, implies that you will take part in the fight ? "

"Yes, and Charlie. But don't look so glum; I did not forget your wishes, and either Mackenzie or Walker will give you a hearty welcome."

Now, as it happened, the remark of the morning had been uttered in jest, and I had forgotten all about it, never thinking that my friend would view it seriously.

Certainly I did not shrink from bearing a hand in the coming struggle, but I thought of the promise made to Captain Gurdon, and almost regretted that Rex had taken me so promptly at my word.

Ought I to draw back? Could I do so with honour? After all, the risk was very slight, and I did not think that either Sara or her mother would chide me when they learned the actual circumstances.

Rex was far too excited to notice the slight hesitation.

"Will you go with Mackenzie's jezailchees, or with the cavalry?" he asked. "Charlie suggests the former, as you are a good shot; but choose for yourself."

"I think I will join the troopers. Are the men in good spirits?"

"Capital! Paul, I believe our chance has come at last. If after breaking these men up we make a determined assault on the city, the rebellion will collapse."

"I hope so; but are we not counting our chickens a little early? Most of the horde yonder I imagine to be wild Ghilzais, and you know how stubbornly they fight."

"They are reckless enough, I grant, and will throw their lives away without hesitation; but an undisciplined mob cannot stand against trained soldiers. There is Charlie,

seeking us, I'll warrant.—Charlie, Paul has elected to join the cavalry."

"Ah! that decision savours of laziness—he intends sparing his legs. Never mind, my boy; I trust you will enjoy a hearty gallop."

"I shall not grumble, unless the ride be toward cantonments, with a crowd of Afghans close upon my horse's heels."

"Traitor, avaunt! I wish Brader were here; he would supply us with an apt quotation."

"Or misquotation! But, seriously, do not permit your valour to run away with your discretion, nor make the mistake of underrating the enemy's prowess. The Afghans have gained too many successes of late to be easily cowed."

"Wait until Eyre gives them a round or two of grape! Even if not cowed, you will see that they will run like sheep."

"Take him away, Rex," I said; "poor fellow, the excitement has turned his brain."

"'Tis only a temporary madness," Rex answered laughingly; "he will recover before the time for action arrives. But in truth we must all be moving. Have you sufficient food for your horse, Paul? If not, send down to Walker; it is poor policy to go riding to battle on a hungry animal."

"Thanks! but we are not quite reduced to starving-point. However, I will go and see him properly fed. Shall I meet you again before the march? No? Then I will bid you farewell in case of accidents."

"Good-bye," said Rex gravely, shaking my hand, "though I trust the future holds many a merry meeting in store for us yet."

"Of course," Charlie cried; "we are not told off to head a forlorn hope, old man. This time to-morrow night we shall be enjoying the fruits of a well-earned victory."

He grasped my hand warmly, and with a last adieu the two walked off together, leaving me to make the preparations which were needful.

My horse was still in good condition, and when, somewhere between one and two o'clock in the morning, I rode over to Captain Walker's station, that officer complimented me upon the appearance of my steed.

"It would have been tantalizing to have lost a fine animal like that," he remarked, referring to the recent adventure in the disused fort.

"It would indeed; old Surefoot and I are too good friends willingly to part company with each other."

"Let us hope he will carry you safely through the fight."

Alas, how little either of us thought what sorry fortune the day was destined to bring to the gallant speaker!

"Should the enemy make a stand at the hills," he remarked presently, "our people will obtain a splendid view from cantonments. The spectacle will be more magnificent than the gladiatorial displays of ancient Rome."

"I suspect they will be far too concerned for the result to care much about the scenic effect."

"And they will be right," he made answer. "This is

our final effort; should we fail—but there is the signal to advance. Steady, men! keep well together. Forward!”

Thus, in the early dawn of that memorable November day, we rode out from the walled camp, our hearts beating fast in anticipation of the victory which should add yet another laurel to the British arms.

It was the first occasion on which I had been present with so large a force, and though our numbers were but scanty compared with those of the enemy, the sight of these gallant soldiers caused my doubts to vanish.

The day was yet early when we halted on the Behmaroo Range, overhanging the fortified village, and took up our assigned positions.

Almost immediately the horse-artillery began operations by a brisk fire of grape, and before long there arose a shout of triumph from our men.

“They are stealing away. Look! the garrison is scuttling out. Hurrah!”

“That’s a good beginning, Mr. Clevely,” remarked Captain Walker. “But I wish we had brought more than one gun with us; the vent will have no time to cool. There go the stormers;” and we raised another cheer as the storming-party dashed down to blow open the gate.

Thus far our efforts had been crowned with success, but now we met with an exasperating check. What was happening down in the hollow we could not see, but minute after minute passed, and still we waited anxiously without receiving the welcome signal to advance.

We gazed wonderingly at each other. What had gone wrong? Was our bold stroke to prove ineffectual?

Suddenly a low murmur of disappointment swept through the ranks, and following Captain Walker's glance, I saw that the storming-party were returning with diminished numbers.

"They have failed," he said tersely, in answer to my implied question; "some obstacle has baffled them. What will be the brigadier's next move, I wonder? probably an attack in force. See, the natives are returning to their posts, and strengthening the defences."

Leaving a strong detachment to hold the height above the village, our leader now ordered a general advance along the ridge toward a narrow gorge between the hills. Here the infantry were drawn up in two squares, while we halted a little in the rear.

Already the situation, though not perhaps critical, was far from reassuring. We had failed signally in the assault on the village, with the inevitable result of heartening the natives and imbuing them with a sense of their own superiority.

This in itself was disastrous, as the Oriental, while submitting tamely to an absolutely dominating power, will fight with the utmost desperation against a foe whom he no longer deems to be invincible.

In addition to this masterful confidence in their prowess, the Afghans on this fateful day possessed three distinct advantages, not the least of which consisted in their overwhelming numbers.

In the second place, as has been previously mentioned, their jezails would throw a bullet much farther than would the muskets of our men; and they rarely exposed themselves, making judicious use of every bit of cover, as we were soon to find.

Almost as soon as we had taken our places, the hill on the opposite side of the gorge became packed with large bodies of marksmen, who, crouching behind a natural bulwark of rocks and stones, began steadily to pick off our men, while our bullets either fell short or did but little execution.

Now, too, I perceived the justness of the captain's remark concerning the single gun. The gallant artillerymen worked with a will, throwing shot after shot across the chasm in rapid succession, until the cannon became so hot that they were compelled to desist.

Hour after hour the men endured the terrible fire, the survivors silently stepping into the places made vacant by the killed and wounded; and I was beginning to wonder what the end would be, when my attention was aroused by a loud shout.

What I saw as I raised my eyes filled me with a sort of unwilling admiration. Up from the gorge there sprang a body of Ghilzai warriors, who, sweeping forward with a cry of "Allah-il-Allah," planted three standards—red, yellow, and green respectively—not more than thirty yards from the first square.

"They must be mad," exclaimed a trooper close behind me.

"It is not madness, but religious hatred," I replied. "Those men care nothing for their lives, if only they can send a detested infidel to perdition."

The scene now became one of unparalleled excitement. We could see the officers appealing to their men, apparently expostulating with them, and pointing to the insulting standards, while the Ghilzais danced and yelled in derision.

But the troops made no effort; they stood vacillating and irresolute, and even Captain Walker in vain urged his troopers to the attack.

Then in the midst of the turmoil the daring fanatics swept on with a sudden vehement impetuosity, capturing the gun, and cutting down the artillerymen at their posts.

In an instant all was panic and confusion. The first square becoming demoralized, broke and fled, carrying the officers with them in their retreat.

I uttered a groan; the sight maddened me. But the fight was not yet over. The second square still remained firm, and the fugitives, gathering fresh courage, paused in their flight and re-formed their ranks.

As if anxious to make amends for the temporary defeat, they turned and confronted the victorious Ghilzais. There was no longer irresolution, no longer doubt or fear; with a vigorous hurrah they dashed at the foe.

The issue was never uncertain for a moment. Like some fierce mountain torrent swollen by winter rains, they burst upon the astounded Ghilzais, overwhelming

them, bearing them back, sweeping them clear over the brow of the hill, and bringing back the recaptured gun in triumph.

Then the wearisome, and to our side murderous, fire began anew, until at length the order came for the baffled troops to fall back on cantonments.

This was the beginning of the end. Instantly every hill grew black with swarms of jubilant Afghans, whose piercing cries filled the air.

Down the slopes they came, horse and foot, a swarthy, black-browed horde.

I gazed at our scanty force, and my heart grew faint with apprehension. "If our men break they are lost," I murmured; and even if they retained their formation, it seemed likely that they would be utterly engulfed in that human sea.

But my own time for action had come. Spurring round the base of the declivity on which we were posted appeared a large body of horsemen, making straight for our enfeebled and disorganized infantry.

Promptly was Captain Walker's resolution taken. We might not be able to retrieve the broken fortunes of the day, but at least we could endeavour to deal one sturdy stroke for honour's sake, especially as by so doing we should interpose between our dispirited comrades and certain annihilation.

Charge! The blast of the trumpet rang out, and gathering the reins in my left hand, I followed the captain down the hill.

The distance just sufficed for the horses nicely to gather way, and then we were cutting and hacking in the midst of the foe.

Down they rolled, horse and rider, many never to rise again. The energy pent up for so many hours at last found vent, and the sword-blows rained incessantly. Just at first we had only the space which our animals occupied, but by degrees we cleared a way, until the opposing horsemen, overpowered by the fury of the onslaught, scattered over the plain.

What happened immediately after that I could never exactly remember. The lust of battle was strong upon me; the "battle-fever," as I have heard soldiers phrase it, fired my blood.

I heard the captain cheer, and cheered in response, but I did not see him. Stretching away over the broad plain were the bands of retreating horsemen, and without a thought of danger, without even pausing to ascertain if any of the men followed, I started in pursuit.

Happen what might, Surefoot should have his promised gallop.

Presently, hearing the clatter of horses' hoofs, I turned in the saddle, and beheld about a score of troopers riding hard after me.

I waved my sword, already wet with blood, and once more settled down to the work.

In a few minutes we reached the nearest Afghans, who drew up in tolerable order to receive us. But nothing could check that mad charge. Hurling ourselves upon the

front rank, we burst through, sweeping them right and left, and without a pause dashed at the main body.

Twice my life would have paid forfeit but for the timely interposition of a brawny trooper fighting on my right hand, and it was only by sheer stubborn obstinacy that we at length emerged from the dense throng.

It was now, when glancing at the handful of brave men who had followed my lead, that the folly of the enterprise presented itself in full force, and truly the situation was one of extreme peril.

From far and near the natives had come down to the plain. We looked in vain for our comrades, who, having probably been recalled, were now fighting their way back to cantonments.

Behind those walls lay our sole hope of safety, but could we reach them? My heart misgave me as I beheld the long lines of horse and foot which intervened between us and the goal.

Still the effort must be made, and without delay. We could but die, and better would it be to meet death fighting bravely than to be cut down without striking a blow. Luckily the horses were not yet spent, and the men's blood was hot.

If we could break our way through that first cordon, there existed a slender thread of hope. I spoke a few words to the men, bidding them keep together, and then, shoulder to shoulder, myself a half-length in front, we sprang at the foe.

The very audacity of the proceeding ensured for us a

temporary success. The Afghans, deeming their prey secure, were opening out to engulf us, and with a cheer we went straight at the weakest spot.

Selecting a chieftain richly dressed, who appeared to wield considerable influence, I rode at him furiously, and evading his fierce lunge by a hand's breadth, struck him full across the sword-arm.

His weapon dropped harmlessly to the earth, and dizzy with the pain he reeled and fell, while his followers crowded around.

"Now is our chance," I cried. "Forward! forward!" and ere the natives had recovered sufficiently to bar our progress we were through and away.

On, on we raced—never faltering, never swerving to right or left, but keeping a straight course toward the camp of refuge ahead. The bullets whistled past us in a heavy shower, but we halted not, though more than one man silently shifted the reins from his bridle-arm, crippled by some leaden messenger.

Soon we had distanced the cavalry in our rear, but the danger was by no means past. Other parties of horsemen were fast approaching from every quarter, and the Ghilzais threw themselves in our way with incredible daring, willingly allowing themselves to be trampled under the horses' feet if only they could deal one deadly blow.

Man after man sprang madly at my horse's bridle, until my arm grew tired with cutting. Still we galloped on, a small but compact body, every stride bringing us nearer to the goal, and reviving hope in our hearts.

And now if the animals could but hold out a little longer we were safe. One body of Afghans alone lay between us and the remnants of our troops even then pouring through the gates.

The troopers from whom we had been separated recognizing us, raised a cheer of encouragement as our horses, quivering with excitement, answered to the spur.

I rode bareheaded, having lost my cap early in the fray, my jacket was torn, blood and perspiration besmeared my face, but by wonderful good luck I had thus far escaped with a few trifling cuts.

Dame Fortune apparently did not intend to desert me just yet; for as we braced ourselves in expectation of the impending shock, the Afghan horsemen, as if acting under orders, gave way, and we passed through unharmed.

To my lively joy both Rex and Charlie had come out of the ordeal unwounded.

"Sara and her mother are just inside waiting to scold you," exclaimed the latter; "but I cannot say that in your present state you are fitted to adorn feminine society."

"No: tell them I am unhurt, and will come up to the bungalow shortly. But Surefoot has had his gallop."

"It was simply splendid, my dear fellow, but you went too far," Rex said, as Charlie ran off to execute my commission. "Poor Walker, I fear, will pay the penalty with his life."

"Is he hurt?" I inquired anxiously.

"Very seriously; in fact, I understand there is no hope of his recovery."

"That is ill news indeed; the army cannot well afford to lose so gallant a soldier. But why did the Afghans allow us to ride through so easily?"

Rex shook his head.

"I can offer no explanation," he observed thoughtfully, "but the circumstance is on a par with their conduct towards the main body. We have suffered heavily, but our losses would have been simply appalling had not Osman Khan, one of the principal leaders, called off his men. However," with a gloomy air, "they have worked mischief enough. Now I must go. Charlie and I have promised to call on Mrs. Gurdon if there is nothing to detain us here."

"Farewell, then, for the present. I am going to groom Surefoot and change my apparel, after which I will join you."

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEATH OF SIR WILLIAM.

CHARLIE DURANT met me outside the door of the bungalow, and we passed in together.

"I have brought back your knight-errant, Mrs. Gurdon," he exclaimed vivaciously; "do not lecture him too severely."

"The title suits Paul excellently," pouted Sara; "he is undoubtedly a knight-errant, if by that you mean a wandering knight."

"Still, you must acknowledge that he has fairly won the bays by this day's work."

"We saw poor Captain Walker's charge," said Mrs. Gurdon; "it was very gallant and well-timed."

"Extremely good, Mrs. Gurdon," cried Rex, who had just entered. "I must congratulate you on such an admirable military criticism. There can be no doubt that the charge saved us serious loss, but I am sorry to say that poor Walker's case is hopeless."

"We can ill spare him now," remarked Charlie. "After what has happened to-day, we shall require every single man."

"At least every man of Captain Walker's stamp," added Rex.

"What will be done now?" inquired Mrs. Gurdon.

The young officers looked at each other dismally; it was manifest that the recent unexpected defeat had disturbed their faith in the future.

"The proverb advises us not to meet trouble half-way," Rex said slowly; "still it is idle to close our eyes to patent realities, and in my opinion the situation has become desperate. Already the troops are living on half-rations, the camp-followers eking out a miserable existence by devouring carrion, while the transport-cattle are actually dying of starvation."

"And every day will augment the distress," interposed Sara.

"That is so: in losing Behmaroo we have lost the sole chance of obtaining fresh supplies."

"If we were in the Bala Hissar, we could hold out for months, until indeed the Indian Government sent up reinforcements," I observed.

"Why not break up the camp and cut our way through the passes?" suggested Charlie; "we should join hands with Sale at Jelalabad."

"With a crowd of women and children and wounded men? The idea is impracticable; we should all be massacred during the march."

"Then, the sole alternative is to remain here, and be starved into submission."

Rex's face flushed crimson with anger.

"Surely you do not imagine that we shall stoop to drive a bargain with the Afghan chiefs?"

"What is the alternative? We cannot starve, and you have admitted that our force is not strong enough to cut its way out. To carry the non-combatants as far as the fortress would prove difficult."

"Charlie is right," I said. "Had we merely the fighting-men to consider, I should stigmatize a surrender as disgraceful, but we cannot expose women and helpless children to the horrors of a forced march."

"I much doubt if the danger would be greater," Mrs. Gurdon remarked. "In my opinion, trusting to the faith of the natives is like putting one's head in a lion's mouth hoping that the beast will not bite."

"At all events some plan must soon be adopted," said Rex, preparing to go. "Perhaps the morrow will bring news of some kind."

Bidding Mrs. Gurdon and Sara a temporary farewell, we set off together—the young officers to their respective duties, and myself to snatch a few hours' sleep, of which I stood sorely in need.

My thoughts were of an extremely gloomy nature as I lay down to rest. The fierce excitement of the fight had worn off, leaving my spirits severely depressed.

Personally I had little cause for anxiety. Had it not been for Sara and her mother, I could have faced the future with a calm mind, but the idea of their danger rendered me desperate.

The result of the day's fighting made it abundantly

plain how hazardous was our position. At the bungalow I had offered no comment on Mrs. Gurdon's last remark, yet in my heart I felt with her that it would be folly to entrust our lives to the tender mercies of the Afghans.

Nor did aught happen to raise my spirits during the days which ensued. For the most part the men hung about listless and indifferent: only amongst those high in command could be detected an air of excitement and unrest.

Osman Khan, the chieftain who had stayed the arms of his victorious troops, came into the cantonments, and was granted an interview with the envoy. Other Afghan leaders, too, came and went, and from a word dropped casually here and there I gathered that negotiations of some nature were being carried on.

One evening I was, as usual, seated with the ladies, discussing the wild and improbable rumours which were being extensively circulated, when Rex came in.

His features evinced a feeling of extreme displeasure, and after the customary courtesies he exclaimed abruptly,—

“Have you heard the news?”

“We are surfeited with news, Mr. Pole,” answered Sara brightly; “but I fear that little of the information which has reached us is of a reliable nature.”

“They were saying in the mission compound that a treaty had been determined upon,” I remarked, “and that the envoy had ridden out to meet the chiefs, but no one seemed really to know.”

“It is quite true. Sir William has returned, and every-

thing is arranged. We are to withdraw the troops from the Bala Hissar, the captured forts are to be restored, and cantonments evacuated within three days."

"What do we get in return?"

"The chiefs will find us provisions, and allow us to march under a strong escort to Jelalabad."

"Why, that amounts to a practical surrender!" I exclaimed, in amazement.

"It is a surrender all along the line," Rex said, in tones of bitterness; "but there appears to be no help for it."

"Well, we must try to put a good face on the business. It has at least one bright side: it will shorten the misery which the ladies are undergoing;" and Mrs. Gurdon assented with a strange smile.

I did not understand it at the time, but later its meaning became painfully clear.

Rex soon left, having to go on duty; and shortly afterwards Sara, complaining of headache, bade me good-night.

I also rose to depart, but Mrs. Gurdon begged that I would remain a little longer.

"I have something to say for which no further opportunity may arise," she observed calmly. "Paul, you have already done a great deal for us. To your courage I owe my husband's life, and during these dreadful days of anxiety your cheerful devotion has kept our spirits from fainting. To these many kindnesses I wish you to add one other. What I am about to say will startle and shock you, but it is true nevertheless. I shall never reach Jelalabad, nor see my husband again. You may get through;

for your sake and Sara's I trust it may be so. Will you promise that you will take care of her, and guard her as you might your own sister?"

I was naturally astonished at so strange a discourse, but the serious expression of the speaker's features forbade my treating the matter lightly.

"Whatever happens you may depend upon me," I exclaimed earnestly. "I will protect Sara with my life if necessary; but I trust ere long to see both you and her restored to Captain Gurdon's arms."

"Thank you," she said, sighing heavily. "I knew you would not desert us; but in case—in case my prophecy should be fulfilled, I beg you to take this locket into your charge. It is of especial value to my husband, and he would like to have it, I know."

She placed a tiny gold heart-shaped locket in my hand, and resumed more cheerfully,—

"Of course you will not mention anything of this to Sara; it would frighten her, and after all my fear may prove a foolish fancy."

I sat some little time longer, and then went out, hardly knowing what to think of this curious episode, but fully resolved that come what might I would spend even life itself in defence of the ladies entrusted to my care.

It was now the night of the eleventh of December, but although Lieutenant Pole's information was amply confirmed on all sides, nothing of importance happened until the fourteenth.

On that date the troops came in from the Bala Hissar,

and two days afterwards the captured forts were given up to the Afghans, who took possession of them with every demonstration of joy.

Still we remained in our quarters, though the lapse of each succeeding day made the present position more intolerable, and the ultimate chance of escape more remote.

The chiefs had not fulfilled their promise of supplying us with provisions, and the bitter Afghan winter was beginning.

On the morning after the natives marched into the surrendered forts, snow fell heavily, and continued without a check until the evening.

To the British soldiers, only half fed and almost fireless, this visitation proved an added misery ; while for the luckless sepoy, inured to the burning sun of Ind, I knew that snowy mantle would sooner or later be changed into a death-shroud.

For nearly another week the situation remained unaltered, save that our men visibly declined both in health and spirits.

Certainly the fighting had stopped, there were no more threatened chupaos or night-attacks, and the chiefs professed the most friendly intentions towards us ; but as they sent in scarcely any provisions, we benefited little by this theoretical good-will.

“If we really are going, why do we not move at once?” asked Rex, in a tone of vexation ; “before long the passes will be choked with snow and ice.”

“The reason is simple,” I replied : “how are we to

march without food? Don't you see that the Afghans hold us at their mercy?"

"In my opinion there is something behind the scenes with which we are not acquainted," said Charlie. "What does that mean, for instance?" and following his glance we beheld the envoy, attended by his staff and a small escort, ride slowly through the gateway in the direction of the Cabul river.

It was the twenty-third of December, exactly a month later than the memorable day on which we met with such a disastrous defeat, and good occasion had we for remembering it.

"A palaver of some kind," suggested Rex; "but I think Sir William is taking a big risk in holding it outside cantonments."

"It shows plenty of pluck at all events," Charlie observed, with an air of pride, "and that goes a long way with these people."

For my part I said nothing, being really and truly afraid of some great catastrophe, but I kept my gaze upon the receding band.

Should the Afghans contemplate treachery, what could such a slender force do to thwart their designs?

Presently Rex and Charlie moved away, but I could not stir; a strange presentiment of evil kept me fixed to the spot.

Gradually I sank into a profound and mournful reverie, from which after an interval of time, how short or long I could not tell, the hurried clatter of horses' feet roused me.

I ran impulsively to the gate, and then paused, stricken with fear. What had occurred? The little body of irregular cavalry came pushing in, the horses panting, the faces of the men denoting abject fright and terror.

Seizing the bridle of the first animal, I addressed the rider in his own dialect.

"Has the evil one crossed your path, that your cheeks are white and your lips bloodless?" I cried. "Has Allah placed the heart of a timid girl within a man's body? Speak! Where is your master? Why have you come back alone?"

The poor wretch shivered as with cold, and his teeth rattled, though the perspiration was streaming from his body.

"We were few," he gasped painfully; "we could not prevent it. Not on our heads lies the blame; it is the will of Allah! Kismet!"

I shook him roughly in my impatience. "Where are the sahibs?" I repeated; "tell me that."

"How should I know?" he answered sullenly. "We rode out with the elchi, and halted by his order. Then he and the other sahibs went on to the river side, where the Cabulese chiefs had spread a loonghee on the ground. It seemed as if the elchi were about to hold a durbar, and we waited. Our orders had been given us."

"Yes, yes," I interrupted irritably; "but the sahibs, what of them?"

"The chiefs seized them and took them away. By this time they are at Cabul, in kyde."

Involuntarily I heaved a sigh of relief. "Kyde" meant prison, and instead of imprisonment I had feared death.

A crowd now assembled, and the story of the envoy's abduction soon spread.

"The cloud grows darker," observed Mrs. Gurdon, to whom I repeated the trooper's story; "ere long it will burst."

"I fail to understand how the enemy will benefit by this act; we were in their power before," was my answer. "Keeping Sir William in prison will not give them a greater hold over us."

A remark from Sara gave an unexpected turn to the discussion. "Paul, can we be quite sure that poor Sir William is still alive?" she asked. "That trooper, by his own admission, could see but little of what passed. In the midst of an infuriated crowd, stirred up to the highest pitch of deadly hatred, would the envoy have much chance for his life?"

This was my original opinion, but after the trooper's story I had rigorously suppressed it. Now it would no longer be held back, and seized me with tenfold force.

Before Sara and her mother I endeavoured, and not without a fair measure of success, to combat the idea, but in my own mind the arguments which I used fell flat.

Meanwhile the camp was in commotion, and, as might have been expected, the utmost excitement prevailed. The story of the escort was debated and commented upon from every conceivable point of view, but it was somewhat encouraging to note that little fear was expressed as to Sir William's personal safety.

The agitation seemed to pervade the city also, as we could plainly hear the beating of drums and the firing of cannon.

Towards evening a mission servant brought me a message from Mr. Raymond, to whom I instantly hastened.

"Have you received any fresh tidings?" I inquired.

He shook his head sadly, saying,—

"No; I begin to fear the worst, and for this reason: Were Sir William merely a prisoner, he would have had no difficulty in sending a message; indeed the chiefs, having succeeded in the abduction, would promptly have given us notice of their intentions. This continued silence bodes no good."

"Then you think—?"

"That the envoy is dead."

"If so, it will be known in the city. It will be dark soon. Wait a little, and I will try to find out what has happened. There cannot be much danger in the attempt."

Mr. Raymond accepted the offer gratefully, and with a promise to bring back some definite news I went to my quarters.

Having assumed an effective disguise, I waited until the night was sufficiently dark, and then crossed the camp to the gate nearest Cabul.

Whether the enterprise would have proved such an easy affair as my imagination pictured it, will not be known, since it was never carried into execution.

The officer on duty was Lieutenant Durant, and at the moment of my coming up he was endeavouring to parley

with two Afghan chieftains, in one of whom I recognized my old friend Umran.

Believing me to be a native servant, a few of whom were always in cantonments, the lieutenant asked,—

“Can you speak English?”

“Yes,” I answered, trying hard to conceal a smile. “Surely you need not put that question.”

Poor Charlie uttered a cry of astonishment.

“Is that you, Paul? What are you doing in that outlandish dress? But you can tell me that later on. Meanwhile extricate me from this mess. Find out what it is the big man has been trying to make me understand. I do wish these people would learn to speak English; it would save a lot of trouble.”

Laughing at the young man's naïve remark, I approached Umran, who stared down hard into my face.

“Who is it that my brother seeks in the camp of the Feringhees?” I asked, speaking in my natural voice.

The Afghan's face beamed as he glanced good-naturedly at my disguise.

“The young sahib is famed for wisdom beyond his years,” he said—“Allah has endowed him with much cunning—but he should not venture unadvisedly into danger.”

“There is no longer cause; I did but purpose seeking news of the captured sahib, and that you will tell me.”

“First explain to the Feringhee officer that I come from Akbar Khan, with a message for the general; then you shall learn.”

Speaking a word to Charlie, who dispatched a soldier

for instructions, I returned to Umran, my heart beating fast with alternate hope and fear.

The very first words confirmed my worst anticipations.

"Allah is great," he said; "He has appointed a time for the destruction of the unbelievers, whose chief was the first to fall. It is fitting that the leader should go before."

"Then you have murdered the envoy?"

The khan raised his head and spoke haughtily.

"Sahib, many times has my sword drunk blood, but my foes have died on the open field."

"My words were idle, as the speech of one who has drunk much wine; I did you an injustice. Still your face declares that the envoy is dead."

"Sahib, you have read the truth. The knives of the Ghilzais are red with his blood. Truly I rejoice at his death, though it came not about by the will of the chiefs. We intended only to hold him as a hostage; but the blood of the Ghilzai is hot, and the point of his sword keen. How it happened even I scarcely know. There was a pistol-shot, a blow, and the Feringhee chief lay dead."

"What of the others? Are there none who have escaped?"

"Yes; two are safe at Cabul, in the house of Mohammed Zemaun Khan. He whom you call Trevor met the fate of his chief."

Then abruptly changing his tone to one of deep significance, he added,—

"Cleverly Sahib, why will you disregard my warning? Truly your eyes must be open to the truth of my report!"

"You forget; the chance of danger no longer exists. We are at peace with the chiefs, who have promised solemnly that we shall leave cantonments unmolested."

Umran smiled.

"When the hunter has dug a pit for his prey," he remarked, "he does not place obstacles in the road which leads to it. Sahib, why will you not learn wisdom? Look around," and he pointed to the soldiers: "I tell you these are all dead. It is the will of Allah. But for you there is even yet time. Why should you ride out to death? In that disguise you could return with me to Cabul."

"A Feringhee does not fear death more than a follower of the Prophet, and there are helpless women looking to me for protection."

"Sahib, the lion is not bolder nor the serpent more cunning than you, but wisdom and bravery will avail nothing. If you march with the Feringhees, you will die."

"Then I shall die with those whom I love. Farewell, if indeed it be so; the memory of your generous kindness will linger in my heart until the end."

At this moment Captain Morris came up, and making a sign to Umran, led the way in the direction of the general's house, and was instantly followed by the two chiefs.

"Is that your friendly Afghan, Paul?" asked Charlie: "he is a fine-looking fellow. Did you get any information concerning Sir William?"

Glancing round in order to make sure that none other was within hearing, I said,—

“Do not betray any excitement, but the chief is the bearer of ill news. The envoy and Captain Trevor have been killed; Lawrence and Mackenzie are still in the hands of the Afghans.”

The young man’s face went white, but he feared not for himself, only for others, as his words plainly showed.

“Paul,” he said, with intense earnestness, “what of Mrs. Gurdon and Sara?” and I think there rose up in his mind the same terrible picture that was deeply engraved in mine.

Presently, pointing to my dress, he said,—

“Is there still occasion for your going out?”

“No,” I replied listlessly; “Umran’s information has put an end to my mission. By the way, do not speak before the men about the envoy’s death until it is made public from headquarters.”

“No; their spirits are low enough already. I will be careful.”

We wished each other good-night, and separated with gloomy forebodings.

Having resumed my ordinary attire, I sought Mr. Raymond. He had, however, been summoned to the general’s for the purpose of taking part in the interview with the chiefs.

As the informal conference seemed likely to last a considerable time, I wrote an explanatory note, and directed that it should be given to Mr. Raymond. Then, not caring to visit the bungalow at so late an hour, I retired to my quarters.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EXODUS.

CHRISTMAS-DAY! For most of my readers what joyful associations are linked with that one word! How the eyes sparkle and the cheeks glow in anticipation of the merry revels! How fondly the memory lingers over the pleasures of that glad season!

Christmas in England! Even the homeless and unhappy have their sorrows lightened for a brief space, while for those whose position places them above want how enviable is their lot!

More than one ideal Christmas-tide I well remember.

How lovingly the mind dwells upon the scene! Outside, the earth clothed with a white mantle; the trees draped with fantastic fairy-like flakes; the frozen ponds bearing a merry, laughing crowd. Then at eventide, alike in cottage and hall, the blinds snugly drawn; the lamps lit; the ruddy fire blazing cheerily, and crowded around the inmates, young and old, whiling the night away with song and jest and bubbling laughter.

But this is not the picture drawn most vividly on my brain.

The Christmas that for me stands out in bold relief from all others is that of the year 1841, nor have the succeeding decades done aught to dim its memory.

From the early forenoon I was busied in copying documents, and the evening shades were already closing around when I started for the bungalow.

For hours the snow had been falling, steadily, silently, heaping the ground, and freezing almost as it fell.

No signs of merriment came from the huge camp, where the men, half fed, lay shivering with the cruel cold, huddling together to secure a little heat from each other's bodies.

By great good fortune I had succeeded in obtaining, on the previous evening, a scanty supply of firewood, which I had instantly sent to Mrs. Gurdon, and a very acceptable Christmas offering it proved.

Rex and Charlie had reached the bungalow a few moments before my arrival, and were warming themselves at the fire.

"Come, Paul," said Mrs. Gurdon cheerfully, at the same time making room for me in the half-circle; "we must not deprive you of a share, since it is owing to you that we have a fire at all."

"It was certainly a novel present," Charlie said. "Mrs. Gurdon, how you would have laughed a few months ago at the idea of receiving a bundle of firewood as a Christmas gift!"

"It will be an incident worth relating when we get back to England," Rex remarked.

I glanced at our hostess, but she betrayed no symptom of embarrassment, save that the smile on her face was somewhat sad.

"By the way, have the big-wigs decided upon anything definite?" asked Charlie.

"My information is not very full, but we may take it for granted that the cantonments will shortly be evacuated," I answered.

"And is the envoy's murder to go unpunished? What excuses do the chiefs put forward to palliate their treachery?"

"They tell the same story as Umran. According to them, Sir William's death was the result of a misadventure. They admit their intention of making him prisoner, and defend their policy on the plea that he was not acting in good faith."

"Morris told me that Captain Lawrence had sent a message, and by his account Sir William met his death at the hands of Akbar and Sultan Jan."

Presently Mrs. Gurdon changed the subject, and strove to brighten the gloom which enwrapped us, but the effort was not particularly successful.

We did our best, but the gaiety was forced and hollow, and it was a relief to every one when at length the lateness of the hour compelled us to separate.

"Good night, Paul!" exclaimed Rex, grasping my hand warmly, as I bade him and Charlie farewell. "I fervently hope that we may never spend such a dismal Christmas again."

I watched those two brave, high-souled English lads as

they walked away together, and the tears came very close to my eyes.

A dismal Christmas-day ! Ah me ! was it fated that we should spend any Christmas-day again, dismal or otherwise ?

But I will not linger over the closing scenes of our last days at Cabul.

Miserable they were, and rendered more miserable by uncertainty.

But through the confusion one truth stood out clearly in the sight of most men. Treaties might be made and ratified, hostages given, oaths solemnly sworn on the Koran, but the ultimate result meant death.

The knowledge came to us from every side : in some instances the Afghans openly boasted of their fell intent ; and I, remembering Umran's repeated warnings, believed implicitly in our coming doom.

Having now but few duties, I spent most of the time with Sara and her mother, making arrangements for the dreary journey.

The New Year, destined to bring such horrors in its train, found us still in cantonments, but the march could not be much longer delayed.

The pitiless snow continued to fall, the streams were frozen hard, the passes were partly blocked, vegetation was dead, fertile plain and barren rock alike were held fast in the iron grip of an Afghan winter.

Our sick had been sent into Cabul ; hostages and many of the cannon had been delivered into the hands of the chiefs, who fed us with empty words and vain phrases.

Twice was the date of the exodus fixed and countermanded, but at length it was definitely decided that the sixth of January should witness our departure.

Now the necessary preparations were pushed on vigorously, but without spirit and without hope.

Outside the walls the natives clustered in swarms, uttering mocking taunts and threats of vengeance, while the chiefs rode to and fro between the city and the camp.

Towards evening Rex, attended by an Afghan bearing two dallies or baskets, came to the bungalow.

"I cannot stay," he said hurriedly; "but I found this native at the gate inquiring for Clevely Sahib. As far as I can understand, he comes from Umran Khan. I thought the matter might be of importance."

"Many thanks, Rex; how does the work go on?"

"I think we shall be ready," and with a smile to the ladies and myself he hastened away.

The native made a low salaam, and placing the dallies on the ground drew a note from his turban.

"From Umran Khan, for the hands of Clevely Sahib," he said.

I took it from him, and opening it found two slips of paper covered with inscriptions in Pushtoo.

The first, of which the following is a free translation, was a message from Umran:—

"From Umran Khan to Clevely Sahib, greeting. The hour is at hand. When next the sun rides in the heavens, the Feringhee host will be marching to death. Cold and famine will make the strong men helpless as babes; the

blood will run in their veins like water. For the Feringhees and their sepoy hirelings I have no pity. They came into our land unasked, unwished for. They drove out the leader of our choice ; they forced us to bow beneath the yoke of Soojah-ul-Moolk, whom we detest. The blood of our warriors has poured forth like a torrent, bathing the soil. Our women mourn the loss of their lords, our children weep for the fathers whose spirits are with Allah. Allah has listened to the cries which have ascended day and night to the heavens. He has delivered your people into our hands ; the hunters have changed places with the hunted, and my heart swells with exultation. The disgrace which the Feringhees have brought upon our land will be wiped out. You I would have saved, but your ears were stopped. Even now I grieve at the thought of the danger awaiting you ; but I press my counsels no more, knowing that your resolution cannot be shaken. Still, I cannot let you go with unseeing eyes. Let those who are dear to you ride not in the rear. Let them clothe themselves suitably, covering their bodies with neemchees, and press forward with the chiefs who will accompany the march. Neither let them be weighted with useless burdens ; there is no joy in riches when the life has departed. At the first hour of the morning my servant will bring a pall to the breach which your officer is making. It is light ; your horse will carry it, and at night it will shelter your friends. The dallies contain provisions—wine, in which the Feringhees delight, and wheaten cakes. Guard the other paper as a precious jewel ; it may preserve you when

all other hope has fled. Farewell ; I pray that Allah may hold you in His keeping."

I looked at the second note. It was an appeal to all friends of Umran Khan and Dost Mohammed to spare the lives of Clevely Sahib and his friends, holding them to ransom, and it was signed with the khan's name.

During the perusal of these documents the Afghan sat stolidly on the ground, but at a sign from me he rose.

"Tell Umran Khan that my heart overflows with gratitude at his kindness. Moreover, do not fail to add that I will be at the breach when the hour comes."

The man made another salaam and withdrew, leaving me alone with the ladies, whose curiosity was greatly excited.

"Is it rude to ask if the communication is from your old enemy?" asked Sara.

"Enemy and friend," I replied ; "he is a singular being. But you shall hear," and forgetting the awkward paragraph in the middle, I began to read Umran's message aloud.

"His advice confirms mine," I concluded. "With neem-chees above your habits, and wearing caps, you will scarcely be distinguishable from the rest. The little tent which he promises will be an acquisition, especially as it is portable."

"He must have taken a great liking to you, Paul. But what does that passage about saving your life mean?" Mrs. Gurdon asked, looking at me earnestly.

"Nothing in particular, merely a reference to some previous suggestion he made," I answered, somewhat confusedly.



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“Paul, you are trifling with us,” cried Sara; “it could have been no light matter to which your correspondent refers. Did he really offer to save your life?”

Thus directly questioned I was compelled to acquaint the ladies with the outlines of Umran’s proposals, at the same time pointing out that for honour’s sake I could not avail myself of them.

“I do not agree with you, Paul,” Mrs. Gurdon said; “there can be no question of honour. Your fortunes are not bound up with those of the British troops. You are free to come and go, and certainly none could cavil were you to take advantage of this man’s generosity.”

“And my promise to Captain Gurdon, what of that? Do you really believe me capable of deserting you in this hour of need?”

“Paul!” exclaimed Sara, and the beautiful blue eyes were moist with tears, “you are sacrificing your life in the hope of shielding us from danger.”

“No, Sara; you exaggerate the importance of my action. Even did I remain behind, the risk would be equally great. As it is, I trust we shall all three get safely into Jelalabad.”

However, it was impossible to convince them that I was consulting my own interests in accompanying the troops, and though they said little, their eyes were eloquent with gratitude.

Acting under my advice, they had already resolved on abandoning their property, taking with them nothing save that which was absolutely needful, and that chiefly warm clothing and provisions.

To the last item Umran's gift made a welcome addition, as our stock was exceedingly limited, and the pall which he faithfully sent proved no less precious a boon. It was beautifully light, and of a size just sufficient to accommodate one person in comfort. However, I did not doubt that by judicious management both Sara and her mother would be able to find room inside.

To facilitate our exit, Lieutenant Sturt, a gallant engineer officer, had received instructions to make a huge breach in the ramparts, and here, in the early morning of the sixth of January 1842, having first put everything in order at the bungalow, I took up my station.

It had been a night of most bitter frost, and the cheerless day opened with a heavy downfall of snow.

I gazed around at the dreary scene with a feeling akin to despair.

With scarcely a handful of food—for the promises of the chiefs still remained unfulfilled—without fire, and destitute of shelter, what fate but death could possibly be in store for the unwieldy mass about to cast itself adrift on this ice-bound land?

"Surely," I said, "the Afghans need not bring fire and sword to hasten our destruction; the elements alone will suffice."

Rex touched me on the arm.

"It is a humiliating spectacle, is it not?" he asked bitterly.

"It is at least very pathetic," I made answer; "even before the march begins Umran's warning is justified. What is our fighting strength?"

"I cannot give you the precise numbers, but approximately we reckon five hundred Europeans, three thousand sepoy, a thousand native troopers, and a troop of horse-artillery."

"Quite a respectable force. Unencumbered we might do great things even now."

"True; but there remain the women and children to be taken into account, besides twelve thousand camp-followers."

"That disorganized mob will prove our ruin. Have you received your orders?"

"Yes. I am stationed with the rear-guard, so it is likely that my march will not be unduly protracted. You, I presume, will join the main body."

"During the first stage; after that I shall take the ladies forward with the advance."

"A good idea! If only you can get them through safely, Paul! But I fear."

"There is a chance, a slender one truly; still I do not actually despair. We have sufficient food, our animals are in good condition, and Umran has sent a small pall which will shelter the ladies from the cold. Should the worst happen, I intend putting a desperate plan into execution."

"What is it?" he eagerly inquired.

I showed him Umran's note, and explained its contents.

"The idea is this," I said. "Should Akbar carry out his threat of massacring the troops, I shall disguise myself as an Afghan—the necessary clothing is packed in readiness

—and strike off across the hills with Sara and Mrs. Gurdon as my prisoners. To any chance comers I shall show this paper, with the explanation that it was given me by Clevely Sahib when dying, and that I am holding the ladies as prisoners for Umran Khan. He is a powerful chief, and has considerable influence. Do you think the scheme practicable ?”

Rex looked doubtful.

“Desperate diseases require desperate remedies,” he said ; “but at any rate I wish you all success.”

It was about nine o'clock when the exodus commenced with the march of the advance-guard, and then, having saddled my horse, I hastened to the bungalow.

Our little party consisted of the ladies, myself, and Mohammed Ali, a youth who had long been in the captain's service, and who was devoted to Sara's interests.

“Good-bye, old house,” Sara cried, half turning on her seat ; “I have spent many pleasant hours under your roof.”

It was with sorrowful hearts that we rode slowly through the crowded camp, and Sara, glancing at the wretched camp-followers, uttered an exclamation of pity.

“Poor people, what terrible hardships must they not undergo !” she sighed.

“A safe journey, Miss Gurdon ; under the circumstances it would be folly to wish you a pleasant one.”

The speaker was Rex, and the girl, with a mournful smile, said,—

“Indeed it would, Mr. Pole ; but do you not come with us ?”

“Not at present; my place is with the rear-guard. I may join you later, but in case of accidents will bid you farewell now. Even if the chiefs exert their authority to the utmost, they will scarcely be able to keep this rabble from doing mischief,” and he pointed to the swarms of Cabulese and Ghilzais hovering round the cantonments.

We wished him good-bye, and passed out beyond the camp.

The scene was weirdly impressive. On the ground the snow lay thick; from the sky the flakes continued to fall without intermission; the huge hills in the distance were white-topped: it was a typical Afghan day in winter.

Behind us lay the camp and the city, from the latter of which poured forth an unending stream of swarthy natives, brandishing their weapons, gesticulating wildly, uttering threats of vengeance, eager for blood and plunder.

In front loomed the stupendous heights through whose narrow, tortuous defiles we must thread our way for many weary miles ere yet we could even dream of safety.

I gazed at the motley procession toiling painfully, even in the first few steps, and my last hope fled. We were no more an army, but a disorganized mob, with only the semblance of discipline, and every face told the same story of physical suffering and mental unrest.

A pitiable sight truly—a huge, unwieldy throng of men and animals, of feeble women and innocent children, going forth to die.

The progress made was wretchedly slow, so slow that

for hours we seemed at a standstill, and ever the crowd of Afghans grew denser, and their gestures more menacing.

My pistols were loaded in readiness, my hand grasped the hilt of my sword, but never had I experienced such a feeling of helplessness.

What could we do, I asked myself, to save this body of unarmed followers from total annihilation? Famine, exposure, and terror had reduced them to impotence; did the Afghans choose they could butcher them like sheep.

Suddenly from the rear there arose a cry of exultation, and looking back we saw long forks of fire leaping toward the sky.

"They have fired the cantonments," Sara said. "Now indeed are our boats burned; henceforth we must keep our faces steadily set in the direction of Jelalabad."

I was glad to see how bravely the girl bore up, and perhaps just a little surprised. I had not at that time learned how bold a spirit oftentimes lies hidden beneath a placid exterior.

"The abandonment of our property was a wise proceeding. See, the ground is already strewn with wreckage," Mrs. Gurdon said.

"For one thing, the animals are too weak to carry a burden. Look at those camels: they will not march ten miles."

I had barely finished speaking when a band of Afghans made a wild rush from our left, slashing at random with their long knives, and heading directly for the camels.

The camp-followers, mad with terror, pressed backward

and forward, screaming with fright, and throwing everything into confusion.

Wheeling round in front of the ladies, I levelled my pistols at the assailants.

But they paid no heed to us. Those in their path were cut down mercilessly; but their present object was plunder, not butchery. In an incredibly short time they had secured their booty and withdrawn, leaving us free to continue the march.

Thus the day passed, and when the order to halt was given, we had accomplished a little more than six miles of the journey.

Having selected a suitable spot, I set to work, and with Mohammed Ali's assistance put up the little tent for the accommodation of Sara and her mother.

Then, producing some of Umran's wheaten cakes and a bottle of wine, I portioned out the evening meal.

"Paul," said Mrs. Gurdon, when we had finished the simple repast, "I do not like this arrangement. How are you going to pass the night?"

"Do not worry about me," I answered cheerfully; "I shall manage capitally. This poshteen"—pointing to my sheepskin pelisse—"is very thick, and the animals"—which were hobbled in front of the tent—"will help to keep us warm. Do you and Sara go in at once. You appear quite spent."

"Indeed I am greatly fatigued, Paul. Good-night. Pray Heaven that you do not suffer on account of your noble generosity."

“Good-night, Mrs. Gurdon ; try to get a good rest. I expect we shall make an early start.—Good-night, Sara ; have no fear. Mohammed Ali and I will keep strict guard.”

“God bless you, Paul,” the girl whispered sweetly ; “we shall never forget what you have done for us.”

They passed inside ; and having seen the faithful Ali comfortably settled, I stood leaning against my horse’s flank, wrapped in thought.

Everywhere the snow-trodden ground was cumbered with the bodies of men sleeping, suffering, ay, though I did not know it then, even dying. A few tents there were, but for the most part the snow formed the pillow, the sky a canopy for that wretched host.

And this was the beginning of the march ! what would be its end ?

With a sigh of anguish I lay down close by the tent, and sought a temporary oblivion from my misery in sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PROPHECY FULFILLED.

I HAD slept for perhaps an hour, when a sudden commotion on the outskirts of the camp roused me, and starting to my feet I listened intently, under the impression that the Afghans were attempting a chupao.

This, however, was not the case; the hubbub was occasioned by the arrival of the rear-guard, which had only now succeeded in reaching the bivouac.

Bidding Ali remain awake and maintain a strict watch over the tent, I hastened across the frozen ground, eager to learn if Rex was safe.

In a few minutes I overtook Charlie Durant, who was going in the same direction, and evidently bound on a similar errand.

"Looking for Rex?" he exclaimed; "so am I. I trust no harm has happened to him. This is a disastrous beginning, is it not?"

"It is, indeed," I answered mournfully; "but there is worse to follow. Poor Rex! I fancy the rear-guard has had a hard time thus far," and the opinion proved correct.

To our joy we discovered that the gallant young officer

had escaped practically uninjured, but his account of the day's doings was terribly disheartening.

"It is the beginning of the end," he said gloomily. "Ever since the main division under Shelton marched from cantonments, we have been engaged with the foe. More than fifty of our number are already lying dead, and the ground is strewn with the bodies of the hapless camp-followers. Are there any orders for the morning?"

"I have not heard of any," Charlie answered. "But now that we know you are safe, Paul and I will return; you will need rest after your tiring day."

"I presume Mrs. Gurdon and Sara are unhurt," Rex said pleasantly; "remember me to them. Many thanks for your friendly visit; but I really do feel fatigued, and shall be glad of an hour's sleep."

Bidding him good-night we walked away; and while Charlie sought his place, I returned to the pall, picking my way over the bodies of the sleeping men.

I did not attempt to sleep again, but paced drearily to and fro in front of the tent, waiting anxiously for the morning.

At the first sign of movement I awakened the ladies, served out the frugal breakfast, and having with Ali's aid securely packed the portable pall, prepared to march in the van.

On the previous day we had journeyed with some show of order, but now all discipline was at an end. My heart ached as I looked at the dark figures rising sluggishly, and with evident pain, from the snowy ground.

A few feet from me lay one man who made no effort to rise. I walked across and shook him, saying in Hindostani—for his dress proclaimed him to be a sepoy—

“Come, friend, it is time to be moving.”

There was no response to my words, and bending over more closely, I peered into his face. One glance sufficed to reveal the truth: the man was dead, killed by the bitter cold.

Raising my cap reverently, I turned and rejoined the others, who were eagerly watching. I looked sadly at Mrs. Gurdon, and knew that she understood.

“Dead!” she murmured. “Poor fellow! And yet, perhaps, it is better so; he has been spared much.”

“He is not alone,” said Sara; and on looking round we saw that the plain was dotted with numerous black objects—the bodies of those whose march was finished thus early.

While we stood conversing, Rex approached, and his bright, smiling, handsome face infected us with its own cheeriness.

“Just in time to wish you good-morning,” he said.—“Mrs. Gurdon, have you managed to sleep?—Miss Sara, I congratulate you on your looks.”

“Are you still on duty in the rear?” I asked.

“Yes, if by any chance I can discover which is the rear; not a very easy feat at present. But I must not stay. Paul, you had better push on ahead before the rush comes; these camp-followers are getting unruly.”

The advice was good, and bidding him farewell, we

mounted our steeds and proceeded to gain the van, which was by this time in motion.

With the exception of the British soldiers and a few of the sepoys, the army had degenerated into a mere mob, pushing, struggling, smitten with panic, swaying aimlessly to and fro, rushing now to the front, now to the rear, at each fresh alarm.

Nor was this fright causeless. On our flanks the Afghans hung in large numbers, dogging every step, uttering threats of vengeance, occasionally firing into the thickest of the crowd.

On all sides of us men fell, wounded or dead, and the natives, as if inflamed by the spectacle, began to draw closer.

About this time I caught sight of Charlie Durant, who was manfully endeavouring to keep up the spirits of his men, by whose side he marched.

We were in the act of pushing on to join him, when a wild cry of terror rose from front and rear, and the vast horde of unarmed men, yielding to a blind, unreasoning fear, surged helplessly around us.

"The Afghans! the Afghans!" they wailed despairingly; and in another instant the Afghans were amongst them, cutting right and left with their sharp swords.

The uproar was appalling. Cries and shrieks rent the air, and groans of anguish, as the keen blades buried themselves in the quivering flesh, while ever nearer to our little group the dark-browed fanatics hewed their way.

Advance or retreat was alike out of the question; our

animals were hemmed in by the multitude of shrieking camp-followers.

By prodigious exertion I managed to wheel my horse round in front of Sara and her mother, so that I faced the enemy. There was no longer a whiz of bullets, but the knives flashed incessantly, and the ground was slippery with the blood of the fallen.

Once I turned to look at my friends, and my heart swelled with pride. They sat their horses steadfastly, with features calm and unruffled, so that none beholding would have guessed how near they were to death.

Must they really die? Was there no way out? Could we do naught but stand tamely and be slaughtered?

Nearer and nearer crept those gleaming knives as the men in our front sank unresistingly to the earth, stabbed in a dozen different places, until at length the Ghilzais were upon us in earnest.

Down went the two foremost as I discharged my pistols point-blank into their faces, and the sweep of my sword brought yet another to the ground. The contest, of course, was hopeless, and I knew it; but if only those two dear ones could get away, I cared nothing for myself.

“Back! back! clear a path with your horses’ hoofs,” I shouted hoarsely.

Meanwhile my skill in fence was doing effective service; but the Ghilzais were about to hurl themselves upon me in a body: the end was at hand. But even as in my mind I bade my loved friends farewell, the Afghans unaccountably paused.

The pressure behind me lessened ; the dense pack began to open out. Something of importance was happening, but I dared not turn to ascertain its nature.

Not for long, however, did I remain in ignorance. On the breeze was borne the welcome sound of a ringing British cheer, and to my right there emerged from the terror-stricken press a little band of men headed by Charlie Durant.

Few in numbers they were, and weakened by exposure and scanty rations ; but swinging clear of the crowd, they went with a will, like one man, at the astonished Ghilzais, who fled hurriedly.

"Thanks, Charlie," I cried, as the young leader returned, flushed, from the pursuit ; "we owe you our lives."

"It was a near thing, but you are all safe, and that is the main point," he answered. "Still the danger is only put off, and I would advise you to ride farther ahead."

"Rex gave me similar counsel, but it is difficult to follow ; these hapless camp-followers block the way."

"They will prove our ruin ; but we need not stop to discuss that. My men must force a passage somehow, and we will carry your party in the midst until we get clear of the rabble."

After speaking a few cheery words to Mrs. Gurdon and Sara, he placed them within the hollow square, and gave the order to march.

When we had fairly started, he said,—

"Have you noticed how ill Mrs. Gurdon is ? I hope she is not going to break down."

The words gave me a sudden shock, more especially as there existed ample reason for the implied doubt.

"These horrible sights have unnerved her," I replied ; but although Charlie appeared satisfied with the explanation, I could not repress a feeling of uneasiness.

Shortly after this, our progress, which had all along been dreadfully slow, came almost to a standstill, and at Boothak, about four miles from the previous camping-place, we were ordered to halt.

"This is sheer madness," I exclaimed to Charlie, with whom we still were : "at this rate, when do our leaders expect to reach Jelalabad ? I should have judged it best to push on with all possible speed."

"I fancy they have no option," he replied. "The fact is, we are completely in the power of Akbar Khan, who is responsible for our safety. Without his co-operation we can never get through at all, and he has most likely ordered a halt."

"Then I fear we are depending upon a broken reed. However, if we are to remain here, I will see about fixing the tent."

Mrs. Gurdon held out her hand to the young officer.

"Good-bye," she said sweetly ; "I have not forgotten this morning's rescue. Send Rex to me presently, if he can spare a few minutes."

"I will deliver your message directly he arrives in camp. But why so serious, Mrs. Gurdon ?"

"One cannot be light-hearted in the midst of such horrors."

"That is true. I trust, however, we have passed through the worst."

"Will you come and dine with us?" I asked. "Thanks to Umran, we are not destitute of provisions."

"I would come gladly, but my time will be fully occupied in attending to the men. By the way, do not fail to move with the advance-guard in the morning; remember the Khoord Cabul defile has to be threaded."

"Poor lad!" sighed Mrs. Gurdon, as he took his departure; "I should like to think he would get through in safety."

"You are certainly taking a despondent view of matters," I said aloud; and lowering my voice, added, "Is it wise? Think of the effect upon Sara."

She smiled at me pathetically, answering,—

"You are right; I will control myself better."

Our meal was at an end, and preparations made for the night, when Rex came up and was warmly greeted.

"Yes," he said, in answer to an observation from me, "I have been extremely lucky; the Afghans have stuck to us like leeches every step of the way. The route presents a terrible picture—hundreds have already fallen; but I hear the chiefs have solemnly sworn that the attacks shall cease. Thank God, we have thus far lost none of our small party."

"Nevertheless death has been very close to us since our last meeting," Mrs. Gurdon remarked, "and that partly accounts for my sending to you. Without giving way to despair, we can still recognize the dangers in our path,

and in case anything happens to either of us, I wish to thank you for all your kindness."

Rex's face flushed.

"I have done little," he declared; "but if you consider yourself in my debt, you shall thank me when we arrive at Jelalabad."

Mrs. Gurdon smiled.

"It is pleasant to find such trusty friends at times like these," she said, and then the conversation drifted into other channels.

Rex waited until the ladies had retired within the tent, and then, taking my arm, he said seriously,—

"Paul, get them away in the very first flight; to-morrow is the crisis of our fate. Should the chiefs prove treacherous, which I confidently reckon upon, few of us will emerge alive from the Khoord Cabul."

"The prospect is gloomy enough; but do you know, Rex, I have an idea that Mrs. Gurdon will never enter the Khoord Cabul. I believe you have bidden farewell to her for the last time."

His eyes, looking into mine, strengthened my fears.

"Her features have altered strangely during the day, but there is no reason why we should look for the worst," he said evasively.

I answered him only by a pressure of the hand as he turned to go, and then took up my station in front of the tent.

I had no thought of sleep; the sights and sounds around effectually prevented that. On all sides stretched that

huge host, famished, thirsting, half dead with weakness and privation.

It was a repetition of the previous night, but with added horrors. Food there was none, nor water, and very few tents. The night-wind was piercingly keen; the snow was a foot deep, resting on the frozen ground, and itself freezing rapidly.

Yet this snow was the bed of thousands, and, alas! to hundreds it proved a shroud and winding-sheet.

To the Englishmen, accustomed to the rigours of a northern climate, this deadly cold was torture; but to the shivering, half-clad, starving sepoy it brought both suffering and death.

In that four miles' march they had dropped by scores, their hands and feet so fearfully frost-bitten as to look for all the world like charred wood.

Many, too, who against every difficulty had struggled bravely on, were desperately wounded, and their groans of anguish reached me as I stood, hoping for yet dreading the approach of morning.

But even as I mused, though as yet I knew it not, the destroying angel had touched with his omnipotent wand one of the fair sleepers within the tent.

"Paul!" exclaimed a voice, "something has happened. My dear mother is cold—oh, so cold! and she does not answer when I speak. O Paul! is this death?"

I knew that the speaker must be Sara, yet the voice sounded quite unfamiliar, so changed was it by grief and terror.

"My poor child, you are frightened," I murmured tenderly; "do not lose heart," and throwing my poshteen over her shoulders, I made my way into the tent.

For the girl's sake I pitted hope against despair; but, alas! the brightest hope is impotent in the presence of reality.

My friend's face was icy cold, her limbs stiff and rigid: Mrs. Gurdon's spirit had passed away.

I would willingly have sacrificed my life to return a different answer, but at Sara's question I could only bow my head reverently.

The girl made no outcry, but stood passively where I had placed her, nor could I attempt to assuage her grief.

In a brief space—how brief I did not know—the new march would begin, when the dead and the living must part company. Over that very spot on which we stood the Afghans would trample, slaying the living, mutilating the dead, and the gentle lady whose friendship I had esteemed so highly must now be numbered with the latter.

I turned to Ali.

"Find Lieutenant Durant, and say your mistress is dead," I whispered. "Let him bring men, and come to me without delay; I wish to bury her."

Ali disappeared swiftly, and then, taking Sara's hand in mine, I waited.

In a few minutes Charlie came with half a dozen soldiers, one of whom I instantly dispatched for Rex.

Then with incredible difficulty we cleared away the frozen snow, and dug a shallow grave in the iron-bound

earth, using our swords and a few iron implements which Charlie's men had collected.

It was a strange burial, and a weird sepulchre, for that dainty English lady. She, who should have slept in some peaceful God's acre of her own dear land, was laid to rest here, on this frozen plain, in the midst of a camp, within gun-shot of a savage foe.

And of those who helped to perform these last sad rites, what shall I say of them? Brave hearts and true they were; brave hearts that for the most part, ere yet the flight of another day was registered, would have ceased to beat!

Very tenderly we laid the body in its resting-place, and Sara, dry-eyed still, kissed the cold lips for the last time.

Then, as we gathered sorrowfully around, Rex recited the beautiful service for the burial of the dead; the earth was replaced; the snow and ice were trodden down, and all was over.

Then, for the first time, Sara spoke. Raising her beautiful face, she said brokenly,—

“Friends all, from my heart I thank you for what you have done.”

“God bless you, miss,” one of the men responded; “we have wives and daughters of our own in India,” and his words were followed by a murmur of sympathy.

To Rex and Charlie she gave her hand, and as they withdrew the latter whispered, “Shift the horses, Paul—picket them over the grave until we move; those savages will dig the body up to look for booty.”

"What about Mrs. Gurdon's animal?" I asked; "we shall not need it now."

"Several of the ladies are compelled to walk; the litters cannot be used, as most of the bearers are dead. Let Ali bring the horse to me; I will pass it on to Mrs. Emsleigh."

Giving Ali directions to change the positions of the horses, I took Sara's hand and led her away, causing her to walk to and fro at a fair pace, lest by standing still her feet should become frost-bitten.

Presently I opened our little store of provisions and pressed her to eat.

"You must keep up your strength, Sara, if only for your father's sake," I urged.

She made no answer, but did my bidding without demur, almost as if unconscious of her actions.

Meanwhile Ali had packed the tent, and at the first sign of movement in the camp I sent him to Charlie with the spare horse.

The moment which I dreaded had arrived, when the bereaved girl must be hurried away from her mother's rudely-made grave. Pressing her hand, I said gently,—

"Sara, it is time to move; see, yonder the chiefs are already riding."

Her eyes travelled from the dreary grave to my face.

"Very well, Paul, I am ready," she answered listlessly, and then with a piteous cry of "Mother! mother!" she burst into tears. And I, standing there, could only murmur reverently, "God's will be done."

But when the morning light revealed to us more clearly the pitiable sights around, I could almost find it in my heart to rejoice at Mrs. Gurdon's death. The ground was literally strewn with corpses; hundreds of famished men, who had lain down to rest on the previous evening, had passed into everlasting sleep.

Numerous little hillocks marked the site of the bivouac—hillocks formed by the bodies of the quiet dead.

Of the survivors, many possessed neither the strength nor the inclination to rise, but lay heedless of their comrades' movements, waiting with a fervent longing for merciful death to release them from their sufferings.

As we proceeded slowly across the snow-covered plain, I began vaguely to wonder how many of us would witness the coming of another night.

From the descriptions of others, I knew that, should the Afghans still oppose our progress, the Khoord Cabul Pass would present them with an almost unexampled opportunity.

Five miles in length, this tortuous defile was but a narrow shaft cut through the frowning heights by a mountain torrent. On either side of the channel, stupendous rocks towered one above the other, forming an impregnable position, from which the natives, with no risk to themselves, could pour a murderous fire into the helpless and struggling multitude below.

What was the intention of our hitherto pitiless foe?

As if in answer to the unspoken question, there came a shout of "Allah-il-Allah!" a whiz of bullets, the gleam of steel, and a body of Ghilzais made a desperate rush at

the centre of our long train, butchering and slaying without mercy.

Then high above their war-cry, above the shrieks of pain and terror, rang out a clear "Hurrah!" from a detachment of the gallant 44th, who drove the foe back at the point of the bayonet.

In itself the incident was unimportant, but it showed plainly what we had to expect, and moreover broke up still further the already disorganized camp-followers. Panic-stricken, they surged wildly to and fro, hesitating, irresolute, uncertain what course to pursue, what path to travel, since every outlet led alone to death.

Finally, that portion immediately in our rear, seized by some blind, unreasoning impulse, swept forward, one part passing through the midst of our ranks, the remainder swerving right and left round the flanks.

Once free, they rushed forward toward the Khoord Cabul Pass, thus throwing themselves unwittingly into the very jaws of death.

Meanwhile, by skilful manœuvring, I had brought my little party gradually to the front, which I considered to be the place of greatest safety. Sara rode in the centre, with myself on her right, and Mohammed Ali on her left, and in this position we moved forward sadly into that narrow way, shortly to be the scene of such dreadful butchery.

Once I looked pityingly into the girl's face, but with a pathetic smile she said,—

"Do not grieve for me, dear Paul; I have no fear."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THROUGH THE KHOORD CABUL PASS.

IN the last chapter I described the entrance of the Khoord Cabul Pass as the jaws of death, and such indeed it truly proved to large numbers of our unfortunate fellow-sufferers.

Even before we reached the pass the scene was one of extraordinary misery. The frightful havoc which the last two days had wrought was everywhere apparent.

Here and there numerous dead bodies, soon to be hidden from sight by the snow, which was even then swiftly and silently enshrouding them, dotted the frozen ground.

The strongest toiled along painfully, while many of the weakest, overpowered by the bitter cold and faint from lack of food, after tottering a few paces with unsteady feet, deliberately lay down to die.

The track was strewn with heaps of valuables, thrown away by the living, or the property of the dead. At every few steps we passed half-starved horses, too weak to stand upright; camels dying or dead; and emaciated, starved-looking bullocks, lolling out their parched tongues in a dumb entreaty for water.

Many and many a piteous sight did I see, and it wrung my heart to feel that I was powerless to mitigate one atom of all that misery.

God is my judge that I would willingly have given up my few advantages, if by so doing I could have helped the poor wretches around me without sacrificing Sara's interests.

But my first consideration was for her. She was bound to me now by a triple tie. For her own dear sake it behoved me to exert all my efforts on her behalf, while, in addition to this, were the promises made to her father, and to the mother whom we had left to sleep in her strange grave.

With this object in view, I hoarded my meagre store of provisions with a miser's greed, taking for myself and Ali only just sufficient to keep life in our bodies.

For the same reason I kept possession of the animals, so that should Sara's succumb under its privations, we might still have the others in reserve.

Directly after the frantic rush of the camp-followers the girl touched my arm.

"Look at that poor woman, Paul," she exclaimed. "See, she has a dear little babe in her arms. Oh, we must help her."

Lying a few yards ahead, and right in the track of the horses' feet, was a woman, poorly clad, and straining an infant to her breast.

"Poor thing!" I murmured; "her sufferings will soon be at an end."

"But we cannot let her perish, Paul!" the girl cried excitedly. "Think of that poor baby dying of starvation on the breast of its dead mother!"

I greatly feared that whatever I could do would only prolong the sufferings of both mother and child; nevertheless, in obedience to Sara's wish, I dismounted and approached the woman.

In my pocket I carried, ready for any case of emergency, a flask of wine, and this, having first removed the stopper, I held to the woman's lips, bidding her drink.

"Thank you," she said feebly, and a little colour crept back to her cheeks; but when I asked if she could not walk a little farther, she shook her head mournfully.

"My leg is hurt," she explained; "I cannot use it."

Now, having put my hand to the plough, as it were, I could not well draw back; so beckoning to Ali, I bade him transfer the packages from his horse to mine, and then come to my assistance.

Having given the child for a moment into Sara's arms, I proceeded with Ali's aid to raise the woman and fasten her securely on the animal's back; after which I restored the infant to its mother, and ordered the Mohammedan youth to lead the horse along.

All this had taken up valuable time, but by dint of pushing on steadily we managed to rejoin the chiefs before they entered the dread defile.

And here there burst involuntarily from the lips of all a cry of horror, a wail of despair.

The sight which then met our gaze will never leave me;

it will stay with me for all time, nor will the vivid picture ever become less distinct.

I have told you how the wretched camp-followers, mad with fear, had, disregarding all order, swept to the front.

Their course had been brief. Here we came up with them. On each flank the stupendous cliffs towered, tier above tier, raising their mighty heads toward heaven. At the base the width was but small; over our heads the sky showed no wider than a hand's breadth.

The bottom of the ravine formed the course of the river, now a thick mass of ice, the edges of which were incrustured with layers of frozen snow.

Somewhere in happier days I had read of the famous inscription, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," and it was borne in upon me how appropriate such a motto would have been affixed to the entrance of the Khoord Cabul Pass.

Sara covered her eyes and shuddered, while I paused for an instant surveying the scene. Across the bed of the stream, on either side, piled on every ledge that could hold a body, the camp-followers lay, their eyes upturned to heaven as if in supplication.

Now and again there would be given in one of the heaps a sign of life—the movement of a limb, the slow turning of a head, a last groan of anguish wrung from some poor wretch suffocating under the pressure of a pile of corpses—and then all again would be still.

But for the most part they were dead, and I thought, perhaps a little enviously, at rest. Yes, there they lay, sleeping peacefully, heedless now of cold and hunger and

toil; no more to be terrified by the Afghan war-cry, but in their one death escaping a hundred.

And what of their slayers? They lined the hills in thousands, shouting exultantly over the fell work. Every rock concealed a fighting-man; not a single boulder but served as a hiding-place for some marksman.

Everywhere the eye encountered the barrel of a Ghilzai rifle. The mountains teemed with life and vomited forth death.

"Paul, this is horrible," Sara cried, as we pressed on over the carpet of dead bodies. "I think my brain will give way."

"Courage!" I answered stoutly. "The worst will soon be over," which I really believed, though in a different sense from that which I wished her to understand.

Thus far there had been no opposition to our advance, but now, as if at a preconcerted signal, a terrible volley swept through our struggling ranks.

A cry on my left and a heavy fall caused me to turn hastily. Ali's horse was down, and rolling upon the woman whom I had rescued.

It was no time for delay, yet a glance from Sara caused me to leap to the ground just as Ali, having cut the fastenings, dragged the woman clear of the dying animal.

"Dead, sahib! both dead!" and looking closely, I perceived that one and the same bullet had loosed the silver cord for both mother and child.

Truly was it a day of horrors, and as I remounted I shook my clenched fist in impotent rage at the hidden foe.

Again and again there came a death-dealing volley, but presently we passed out of the range of fire—we three at least—still scathless.

Ali pointed to the bare rocks with a grin.

“There are no devils there,” he cried. “We shall get through before they come.”

But now the rattle of musketry burst out again most furiously in our rear, and I saw Sara turn her head.

The one thought had occurred to us both at the same time—How many of those behind would meet with similar fortune to ours?

Volley after volley belched forth its leaden storm; at frequent intervals each side of the defile became a sheet of flame; and whenever the firing ceased, the chant of “Allah-il-Allah” rose sternly, ferociously, exultantly on the air.

To me, who knew a little of war, it appeared impossible that those who followed us, even were they the bravest of the brave, could get through. In a short time the narrow passage would be choked with the bodies of the dead, and these in themselves would form a barrier to the progress of the survivors.

And amongst that struggling, dying mass were the two gallant young officers whom the close and constant intercourse of the last few months had taught us both to love as brothers.

Even at that moment they might be lying dead, or, fate more pitiful still, desperately wounded, waiting helplessly for the final act of death and mutilation.

I dared not trust myself to look at Sara, knowing that

these thoughts were in her mind also. Yet we could do nothing; there was the pity of it. To turn back would be sheer madness, and so we pressed on as swiftly as the ground would allow, while ever behind us continued the rattle of the guns, the groans of the wounded and dying.

We followed the tortuous winding of the Khoord Cabul for about five miles, and at length, emerging from the scene of butchery, entered upon the plain which had been selected as a camping-ground.

By this time part of the miserable remnant of camp-followers had come up, but behind the deadly work was still in progress, and we could glean no tidings of our two friends.

Without delay I fixed the tent for Sara, who regarded me with wistful eyes.

"Paul," she said tearfully, "is there any longer hope for Rex and Charlie?"

"Why not? Surely all the 44th are not killed! But can you bear being left in Ali's care a short while? There is no danger here, and I will seek for news."

"Yes, go, go!" she replied excitedly. "But, O Paul, do nothing rashly; I cannot lose you too."

I pressed her hand gently, saying,—

"Do not fear; I will run into no danger, for your sweet sake. Now, get under cover; Ali shall mount guard."

Running swiftly I traversed the stretch of plain, meeting a number of followers, helpless, huddled together, many bearing fearful wounds. Some, too, I passed lying motionless and still, overtaken in their headlong flight by death.

Still the noise of firing continued, becoming more plain, and now I could hear the sound of cheering.

"Thank God!" I cried. "That at least means fighting and not murder."

And so it proved. On the hills at the exit from the deadly pass I beheld a body of the brave 44th holding the mouth of the defile against a swarm of Ghilzais. At last, then, the massacre was checked—stopped for a brief space. As long as the soldiers' ammunition lasted I knew that all the warriors in Afghanistan could not force a passage.

As I stood searching earnestly to see if haply my friends still lived, a wounded 44th man came limping toward me, tenderly supporting a comrade more seriously injured than himself.

"Have you seen Lieutenant Pole or Lieutenant Durant lately?" I asked.

"Mr. Durant is on that hill to the left, sir. I belong to his company."

"And Mr. Pole?"

"I do not know, sir;" and I somehow fancied that a note of sorrow rang in the man's voice.

Striving to shake off the impression, I ran forward, climbing the rocks in the rear, until I stood by Charlie's side.

He was surrounded by a gallant little band, and fighting like a madman. His cap was gone, his face grimed with powder, in several places his clothes were scorched, his eyes were wild and bloodshot, and blood—some of his own—dyed his hands and cheeks.

"Where is Sara?" he asked, catching sight of me.

"Safe in the tent; she bade me seek news of Rex and you."

He groaned aloud, pausing in the terrible work. Then he cried fiercely,—

"Go back and guard her; you must not stay here."

"And Rex," I asked anxiously, "where is he?"

He burst into a bitter laugh.

"Rex!" he cried; "ah! where is Rex—Rex with the true heart—my more than brother?"

He sprang to the edge of the rock, exposing himself to the fire of a hundred rifles.

"Come back, come back, sir!" shouted the men, and a level-headed old sergeant, darting forward, dragged his officer back.

"Nothing to be gained by exposing yourself in that way, sir," he said. "You will do much more good lying down here snug."

"Charlie," I said, "if Rex is gone, that is the more reason why you should live. Remember, Sara may yet need your aid."

He pressed my hand warmly.

"All right," he answered; "I will recollect. I think I must be mad just now. Only do you go back. If I live through this, I will come to the tent; if not, my men will bring my body.—Lads, if I fall, will you take me to Mr. Clevely?"

"Ay, that we will, sir, if we have to cut our way through ten thousand devils," cried Sergeant Stewart; "but the bullet that is to kill you is not cast yet."

All this time the balls were whistling about our ears, over our heads, flattening themselves against the rocks at our feet; but the men being well covered, suffered comparatively little damage.

“Go back, Paul!” the young officer cried again. “The camp may be stormed while you are away.”

Once more I wrung his hand, and then turning, descended swiftly to the level ground.

Sara was standing outside the tent, straining her eyes in the direction of the pass.

“Speak, Paul!” she cried eagerly. “What is your news? Where are our friends?”

“I have seen Charlie; he is unhurt, and helping to hold the pass. He will be here shortly.”

“And Rex? Ah! do not tell me; he is dead—Rex is dead!” and without another word she withdrew into the tent.

I made no attempt to detain her; her sorrow was sacred, and my own heart was heavy with grief. Yes, there could be no doubt the gallant, high-spirited lad was dead; and my eyes grew moist with tears.

Over in dear old England I knew from his former speech there lived a sweet-faced, gentle lady whose life was bound up in that of her noble son. And now he lay dead, his body mutilated, his flesh food for the carrion-kites. Ah me, the pity of it!

Sara had eaten nothing since the morning, nor had I; in truth, our grief and horror had caused us to forget the necessity of food.

The boy Ali, worn out and exhausted, lay asleep,

wrapped in his sheep-skin ; while I, standing by the body of my faithful steed, watched for the coming of the gallant 44th, fearful lest even now we had not touched the depth of our misery.

For hours the wearied men came dropping in, singly and in groups—camp-followers, sepoy, wounded Europeans—and at last Charlie himself. He walked slowly and as if in pain, but to my joy I found he had no serious hurt.

“Does she know ?” he asked in a whisper, with a glance toward the tent.

“Yes ; she read the truth in my face.”

Then for a space we stood in silence, each communing with his heart.

“Poor Rex !” my companion murmured presently. “Paul, I loved him as a brother,” and his voice was husky with suppressed sobs.

“Tell me about it,” I urged ; “it will relieve you. Did you see him fall ?”

“Yes ; and I could not save him, nor even die by his side, though I tried hard. You will not readily forget the scene in the shambles yonder, and yet you were spared the worst. When it came to our turn the sight was awful. The camp-followers in your rear had been mowed down in hundreds. They lay in heaps—they choked the pass ; it was a struggle for the living even to force a way. And all the time the firing never ceased, while we were helpless. The men dropped by dozens ; the situation was maddening. Up above, the Ghilzais, perched in security, picked us off at their ease. ‘Let us climb the rocks,’

cried one of the soldiers; 'who will lead us?' The feat seemed impracticable; it was little less arduous than scaling the walls of a house; but what mattered that? The certainty of death awaited us above, but at least we should die fighting, while in the pass we were being shot down like rabbits. I heard the appeal, and looked round for my captain; he had just fallen at my side. Then there arose a cry, born of despair and desperate bravery. Twenty men were climbing the rocks, and Rex led them. The Ghilzais rushed from their hiding-places with a shout, and our men in the ravine, seizing the opportunity, poured a volley into them, driving them back pell-mell. Just then poor Rex reached a ledge which barely afforded him standing-room. He glanced round, and, waving his sword, cheered. It put new heart into the fellows below; they scrambled on like wild cats. The sight intoxicated me; my blood was hot. Bidding the men of my company fire on any Afghan who showed, I took a handful of volunteers and followed after Rex. Up, up we went, clinging to every projection that gave any holding, sticking our feet into the crevices, grasping here and there a dwarfed furze bush that promised to stand firm. I overtook and passed several of the men of the first body, but could not reach Rex. I called to him, and he answered with a cheer. I tell you, Paul, our blood was on fire. But the end soon came. The gallant fellow, still far ahead of his men, gained the rock behind which the Ghilzais crouched. Without a second's hesitation he dashed amongst them single-handed. We could hear the crack of his

pistols, the clatter of steel, the savage cries of the foes, but the huge boulder hid the drama from our view. I need not tell you how I toiled and strained. Look at my fingers; they are cut to the bone. The perspiration streamed down my face; I took leaps which in my sober senses would make me giddy to think of. We were all mad, but it was a generous madness. From the other side of the pass the Afghans fired at us, and several men dropped; but the others went on nevertheless, until at last a sergeant named Mahoney with a shout joined his leader. Another followed, and another, three, four, five, each with a rousing cheer, until I myself reached the spot. It was a narrow ledge, but the boulders in front prevented us from tumbling over. Rex was still alive and fighting desperately. His sword had snapped, but he had snatched a tulwar from a slain Ghilzai, and was laying about manfully. 'Fight on, old boy,' I cried joyously; 'there are others behind.' It was all quite hopeless of course, insane, foolhardy, but it was better than being shot down without giving a blow. But if we were indifferent to death, our opponents minded it still less. One of them, unarmed, rushed upon Rex, and heedless of a slashing stroke from the tulwar, caught our poor friend round the waist and dragged him to the ground. In a second a dozen knives were reeking with his blood, and the dear fellow's head was severed from his body. Then they came with a rush, bearing us backward. 'Back, men,' shouted Mahoney, 'down you go, one at a time; we can't hold this.' He and I covered the retreat, until we two alone were left confronting our savage foes. 'Now,

sir, lose no time ; it's your turn. Jump for that ledge, and slide down to the bush below ; it will hold, and it's easy afterwards. Never mind your sword.' I did as he bade, jumping as if in a dream. I gained the ledge and the bush in safety ; but after that my mind is a blank. I must have stunned myself somehow, for they picked me up unconscious."

"How did Mahoney fare?"

"There is little the matter with him except grief ; he would have given his life for Rex."

Remembering the flask of wine I gave it to Charlie, insisting that he should drink, and at the same time produced one of Umran's cakes.

The poor fellow had been fighting all day ; he was famishing from lack of food, and yet it was with the utmost difficulty he could be induced to accept this trifling refreshment.

"No ; I can manage," he said. "You will require it all for Sara." But after receiving my solemn assurance that there remained ample provision for her needs, he took it, although only with extreme reluctance.

Then I suggested that he should seek some repose, remarking that he would need all his strength on the morrow.

He shook my hand sadly, saying,—

"There will be a long rest soon, my friend. First Mrs. Gurdon, now Rex ; it will be my turn next. But if only you can save Sara, I shall be content."

"I will do my best," I replied, and then with another handshake we separated.

My expectations with regard to the following day were not fulfilled. We broke up our camp in the morning as usual, and with a repetition of the same sad scenes that had hitherto attended us, began the march.

Our progress was distressingly slow. The men were exhausted, the starved animals could scarcely use their limbs, and we were still hampered by a body of camp-followers, although of these last nearly three thousand had laid down their lives in the Khoord Cabul.

We had, however, advanced little over a mile when an order to halt was issued.

At first I could not credit it, but when its authenticity was placed beyond doubt, I was lost in amazement. What could it mean?

"It matters little, Paul," Sara said wearily; "the result will be the same."

From seeing several emissaries of Akbar Khan in the camp, I concluded that some fresh negotiation was on foot, nor was my supposition wrong.

We had dismounted in order to ease the animals, but I had not put up the tent when Charlie joined us. He had not seen Sara since Rex's death, and the meeting was full of pathos.

"Paul has told me the story," the girl said, putting out her hand. "It was like you—true to the end."

For a moment or two he averted his head, and we knew that his eyes were filled with tears.

When his emotion subsided, I inquired the cause of the halt.

"It is the one bright spot in the gloom," he answered. "I have hastened to inform you. Akbar has sent for the

married officers with their wives and children, and has sworn a solemn oath that no harm shall come to them."

I looked at Sara with a glad smile, and fervently exclaimed, "Thank God!"

The girl's eyes flashed angrily, and a red spot appeared upon each of her cheeks.

"Do you thank God on my account, Paul?" she asked. "Can you imagine that I would place myself under the protection of the man who is virtually responsible for my mother's death?"

Charlie and I attempted in vain to shake this resolution; Sara remained inflexible.

We pointed out the inevitable fate which awaited those who were left with the main body. She was not to be turned from her purpose, and at length we desisted.

"When are we to move?" I asked Charlie.

"Not until the morning; Akbar has promised the general a supply of ottah."

"Come and have a chat with us later on, if you can spare the time."

"I will, and bring you the latest news."

"Paul, my dear friend," said Sara, when the young officer had taken his departure, "I am sorry I spoke so harshly just now, but I cannot go with that horrid man."

"Then you shall not," I answered smilingly, "and it may be that your decision is a wise one."

But although I spoke thus smoothly, not wishing that the girl should be vexed, yet in my heart I grieved that she had not taken advantage of the opportunity offered her.

CHAPTER XIX.

"TELL THEM I DID MY DUTY."

WHETHER Akbar performed his promise to send in a supply of ottah I cannot say ; if he did, it must have been a very small amount.

The other part of the contract was, however, carried out, the married officers, with their wives and children, being hurried away to the camp of the Afghan chief.

This exodus still further decreased our already-diminished numbers, and moreover allowed us to act with greater freedom.

But the period when we might have attempted a bold movement with any chance of success had gone by : the men were reduced to skeletons, and our steps were still clogged by the remnant of the twelve thousand camp-followers who had started with us from Cabul.

However, on the following morning we set out once more, if not in high spirits, at least with a dogged resolve to persevere as long as a spark of life remained to us.

On this occasion the camp-followers were in the rear, the advance consisting of the men of the 44th, the troopers, and the single gun which had been saved amidst the general wreck.

A brisk march of two miles brought us to the Tinghee Tarekee, the narrowest pass we had yet encountered. It could not have been more than twelve feet in width. But luckily the passage was a short one; and a detachment having been posted to assist the rear-guard, the rest of us pushed on as far as Kubbar-i-Jubbar.

Here a halt was called to allow of the others joining us. But the cup of our disasters was by no means full. The neighbouring hills were, as usual, crowded with Ghilzais; but thus far they had done little damage beyond one or two casualties—the effect of a few long-distance volleys.

During this march I had persuaded Charlie to ride my horse while I took a spell of walking.

We were standing now in a little group discussing the situation, when from a long way in the rear there came the sharp ring of musketry-firing.

“They are attacking our people in the pass,” Charlie exclaimed. “May Heaven help them! but I fear they are doomed.”

“Look!” cried Sara excitedly, “there is one poor fellow running towards us, and several others behind him.”

We could now see a body of fugitives advancing at their utmost speed, and knew without words that they were the survivors of the massacre which had just taken place.

I glanced round sorrowfully on our company, and was once more filled with despair.

Of the great host which had marched from Cabul we

counted now but one hundred and forty Europeans, a hundred sepoy troopers, and a handful of camp-followers. What could such a meagre gathering do against a country in arms? Alas! absolutely nothing, save to die with fortitude.

This, too, must be Sara's fate, unless perchance I could succeed in executing the project which I had communicated to Rex; but of this there appeared at present little likelihood.

Still, if the plan failed, it could end in nothing worse than my death and Sara's temporary captivity, as I did not think it likely that even our savage foes would slay her in cold blood, expecting rather that they would hold her to ransom.

It had been arranged that we should halt for the night in the Tezeen valley, and in that direction the camp-followers, on the resumption of the march, rushed in the utmost disorder.

From the Huft Kotul—which means, being interpreted, “The Hill of the Seven Passes”—there is a tremendously steep descent into the Tezeen ravine, and the sides were lined by the Ghilzais, who poured in such a murderous fire upon the unarmed and defenceless fugitives that very few reached the bottom.

We also suffered severely; but by dint of pushing ahead, returning the enemy's fire at every opportunity, and an occasional cavalry charge, we finally drew up on the Tezeen plain, and I immediately proceeded to pitch Sara's tent.

Charlie now returned me my horse, having taken posses-

sion of a troop-horse whose rider had been killed ; and when Sara had retired I began to explain to him my wild scheme for her future safety.

I scanned his features narrowly while I spoke, but they told me nothing.

"What do you think of it?" I asked eagerly ; "is it practicable?"

"It means death for you," he answered slowly ; "but provided the girl were saved that would not deter you."

"Not one bit," I replied cheerfully ; "let us leave that out of the calculation."

"Then I think it might be done. But you must wait until all is quiet, and unfortunately there is a bright moon. Moreover, there are the animals to be considered."

"I have thought of that : they must be left behind. The walking will be excessively fatiguing to Sara. But that cannot be avoided ; the horses would betray us at every step."

Charlie was about to reply, when a soldier approached with the request that he would immediately go to Captain Johnson.

"Take no steps until my return, or until you hear from me," he said hurriedly, "and meanwhile get an hour's sleep."

I was in truth very weary, having slept little since the beginning of the retreat ; so instructing Ali to keep a sharp look-out, and to awaken me at the first sign of danger, I wrapped myself up warmly and lay down.

I must have been asleep nearly two hours, when a hand

placed lightly on my face caused me to spring instantly to my feet.

"Hist!" said Charlie, in a low voice, "make no noise. I bring important news, which may cause you, at least for the present, to give up your plan."

"Speak on; I am listening."

"There has been a big palaver in the general's tent; it is only now ended. I fancy the credit of originating the scheme belongs to the brigadier, but am not certain. However, that is immaterial, since every one has agreed to the proposal."

"Yes, yes, go on," I whispered. "What is it? Are we to make a sudden dash forward?"

"The very thing! It is a forlorn hope, of course, but still it is not certain that we shall fail. The Ghilzais are quiet, believing they hold us at their mercy; and if we can only secure a decent start, all may yet be well. At any rate the plan is to be adopted, so you had better rouse Sara and get ready."

I nodded, and with a glance at the sky remarked,—

"It is a pity the moon is rising."

"In one way it is; still, without its light we should infallibly miss the way, so we must perforce take the evil with the good."

"When do we move?"

"Now—almost immediately."

"And the next halting-place?"

"Jugdulluk. If we get there without further loss, I shall begin to hope again."

Swiftly and without noise the orders were passed round, and the wearied men, roused from their slumbers, silently fell into line.

Having awakened Sara I rapidly explained the situation, and in a few minutes the tent was taken down and deftly folded.

The scene was weird and impressive. Overhead the calm moon, shining with reflected light in a clear sky; at our feet the frozen snow. On all sides towered the huge hills enclosing the broad plain, dotted with dark figures stealing quietly along.

At first all went well. The natives, imagining us to be in their power, were recruiting in sleep strength for the next day; and our pulses began to quicken with the advent of hope, when suddenly the warning sound of a rifle rang out on the still night air.

Instantly all was confusion. Gun answered gun on the adjacent hills; a thousand Ghilzais made a rapid rush at the rear, and for a brief period it seemed as if we must be overwhelmed.

Once again, however, were our lives saved through the steady valour of the gallant 44th, who, marching rapidly to the rear, drove the enemy off.

It was now midnight, and we toiled on steadily for another eight miles, when a halt was called, for the purpose of allowing the rear-guard to close up.

Since the first attack we had met with little opposition; but now, on the march being resumed, the enemy began to show in considerable numbers.

Still, nothing serious occurred until we were within two miles of Jugdulluck.

Here the descent into the valley begins, and the Afghans, as usual, were strongly posted amongst the hills on either side. From this safe cover they poured a galling fire into our ranks, and once more the dead and wounded littered the ground.

Having suffered heavy losses we finally got through the ravine, and took up a position on the nearest height, behind some ruined walls.

The rear-guard had not yet arrived ; and having seen to Sara's comfort as well as the nature of the case would allow, I joined the handful of officers who were watching eagerly for their gallant comrades.

For a space the firing had ceased ; but now it commenced afresh with the utmost fury, and we knew that our friends were in the midst of the perilous decline.

Did they possess sufficient strength to break through that terrible cordon, or would they all perish ? The knowledge of our own danger passed unheeded as we stood with straining eyes.

At last there issued from our parched throats a feeble cheer. Out from the mouth of the defile they came, many wounded, all weary, but still struggling on with heroic fortitude, fighting a way through the opposing horde.

I saw Shelton, the one-armed brigadier, and many another gallant soldier, but I searched in vain for Charlie Durant.

"It will be my turn next."

Those sad, pathetic words came home to me now. Had the prophecy been already verified? Were we indeed bereft of our sole remaining friend?

Once again my glance travelled over the approaching band, and this time I could not refrain from a cheer. I almost wished that Sara could share with me the sight which now met my gaze.

Right in the rear, with the bullets whistling round him like hailstones, I espied the chivalrous young officer, calm, as if no danger threatened.

Now, too, it became plain why his movements were so slow. Himself apparently unhurt, he was supporting a wounded comrade, who could not walk without assistance.

I turned to the man on my right, who, as luck would have it, was none other than Sergeant Mahoney.

"Do you see that?" I cried excitedly; "they must both be killed. Look! the Afghans are pouring down the ravine."

The sergeant followed my gaze, and his eyes flashed with a proud light.

"Mr. Durant is a gentleman worth dying for," he said significantly, and grasping his sword with a firm grip he sprang out on the hillside.

I had not understood his meaning. But now my eyes were opened, and heedless of the heavy fire from the adjacent heights, I dashed after him. The distance was short. We reached the plain, we mingled with the foremost of our men, who, suddenly realizing the cause of the wild rush, turned back with a cheer, just in time to prevent

the Afghans from closing round the heroic officer and his injured comrade.

One glance at the latter convinced me that his wounds were mortal, and Charlie, reading my thoughts, exclaimed,—

“We have fought shoulder to shoulder since midnight, and I will not leave him now.—Thank you, sergeant,” as Mahoney went to his aid; “we can manage nicely like that.”

Up again we went, slowly and wearily, shot at from all sides, until we reached the shelter of the walls.

Here we placed the dying man, in such a position that no bullets could touch him, and Charlie bent tenderly over the prostrate body.

“He was a brave fellow,” exclaimed the young officer sympathetically. “See, he has been hit in several places, but the real mischief was done just as we got into the valley. But I have not thanked you yet, Paul, for saving my life; it was a plucky act.”

“The credit belongs to Mahoney, not to me,” I answered; “he set the example.”

“Yes; I do not forget his share in the business. This makes the second time he has got me out of an awkward scrape. But what of Sara? has she escaped without hurt?”

“Yes; she is in the tent yonder, but I know not how much longer she will bear up.”

“Have your provisions failed?”

“Not quite; I can manage to make them last out a few days longer.”

"For her! Paul, you are starving yourself."

I laughed uneasily.

"We do not keep an unlimited table," I answered, "but if Sara's wants are satisfied I am content."

Wringing my hand, he moved away in silence, but soon returned, carrying a piece of meat cut from a dead bullock.

"Now we will have a little feast," he remarked gaily. "This is our share of the three bullocks which the general has just had killed."

He cut it in two with his sword, handing me one piece. It was uncooked and excessively tough, the slaughtered animals having been old worn-out gun-bullocks, but we sat down as to a banquet.

Charlie had guessed correctly. I was nearly famished, having reserved my share of the provisions for Sara, and this tough chunk of dead gun-bullock proved most welcome.

Meanwhile the Afghans, who had taken possession of a height close at hand, recommenced their rifle-practice, and several more of our men dropped.

With regard to Sara's present safety there did not appear much cause for uneasiness, as the little pall was pitched well out of the range of fire, and no harm could happen to her, unless the foe carried the position by assault.

Nevertheless the situation was replete with misery. The savage yells of the tribesmen mingled with the groans and entreaties for water of our own wounded.

One heard that piteous appeal on all sides, and there

was not a drop wherewith to soothe the suppliant's agony. Less than two hundred yards away there ran a clear and limpid stream; but its presence only served to mock our distress, as it lay right in the line of a destructive fire.

Already several men had lost their lives in the endeavour to reach its margin, thus teaching us the hopelessness of the attempt.

All this while the man whom Charlie had brought in lay insensible, but just as we finished our meal his lips unlocked, and he moaned feebly for water.

Charlie stooped down and cooled the fevered brow with the cold snow, but the sick man did not cease his pitiful cry.

"Paul," cried the young officer at last, "this is simply awful. I cannot stand this; it will drive me mad. I must fetch the poor fellow some water."

I pointed to the steady storm of bullets, and begged him to give up the idea.

"The man is dying," I urged; "why throw your life away uselessly? Is not the loss of Rex enough? Am I to be overwhelmed with horrors?"

"I must go, Paul," he cried. "And, after all, the sacrifice is not great; it is only dying a few hours sooner."

"Then I will go with you, and we will fall together."

"Impossible! what is to become of Sara? No, dear friend; your life belongs to her."

At this moment an incident occurred which promised to make his attempt a shade less perilous. The fire from the adjacent height had become so serious that it was resolved

that an effort should be made to drive the marksmen from their post, and accordingly about twenty men of the 44th sallied out from behind the dilapidated walls.

The vigorous charge met with immediate and unexpected success. The Afghans, seized with sudden panic, surrendered the hill, and fled precipitately; while our gallant fellows, cheering lustily, occupied the forsaken ground.

"Now is my time," Charlie cried. "Good-bye, Paul, if I do not return."

He disappeared for a space amongst the crowd of camp-followers, and then I saw him running at lightning speed toward the stream.

Others, too, watched him with bursting hearts; they understood and appreciated his rare self-devotion.

"It is young Durant," said one, "fetching water for the wounded." And as he flung himself at full length by the side of the rivulet, our men sent up a wild cry of joy.

As I have previously mentioned, a small detachment of the 44th had cleared one height; but there was a second, still in the possession of a considerable number of Afghans.

These last, moved by one common impulse, now deliberately levelled their jezails at the heroic officer, as if waiting for him to rise. Nor were our men idle. Every gun was brought to bear upon the Afghans, and at the critical moment a well-directed volley was poured into the savage throng.

Again and again we fired, reloading as quickly as possible, and doing so much execution that the enemy were glad to shelter themselves.

Then Charlie, closely hugging his precious burden, began to retrace his steps, while hundreds of eyes followed his every movement with intense anxiety.

So entirely was my attention taken up that I did not know Sara had left the tent until she plucked me by the sleeve.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Charlie fetching water for the wounded. But go back; this is no fit place for you."

The injunction passed unheeded.

"How foolish!" she cried, "and yet how noble, how grand! God grant that he may return alive! Where is he? I must see him;" and regardless of danger she peered over the broken wall.

"He is coming, Paul," she cried joyously, "and unhurt!"

Incredible as the statement appeared, it was yet true. The gallant lad was now within a few yards of comparative safety, and our hopes grew bright.

But the Ghilzais, maddened at being thus balked of their prey, boldly left their cover, and in spite of heavy losses swept the hillside with a searching fire.

The smoke from our guns hid our comrade from view, and under its canopy I dashed out, followed by Mahoney and a dozen others. We found him advancing steadily, and it was not until he had delivered the iron vessel into the sergeant's hands that I knew he was hit.

"Do not waste a drop," he said faintly; "I have bought it with my life." Then he fell heavily across my shoulder.

We bore him gently behind the wall, and laid him by

the side of Sara's tent. The brave girl knelt down and moistened his lips with the water which had cost us so dearly.

"Do not grieve, sweet friend," he whispered faintly; "I go to find Rex. They will say in England that we have done our duty. Did Mahoney give that poor man some of the water?"

I did not like to let him know that the soldier had died even before the stream was reached, but I do not think that my suppression of the truth will be accounted a heavy sin.

The young officer closed his eyes peacefully, and though his pain must have been intense, no murmur of complaint passed his lips.

"They will say in England that we have done our duty."

Brave words these, typical of the loyal spirit so soon to pass beyond our ken; typical, too, of the British soldier—officer or private, it matters not which—who in all ages and in every clime has willingly laid down his life at the call of duty.

Long hours Sara and I knelt there, heeding not the cold or the din of battle, unconscious of the tragedy being played out around us, concentrating all our energies to ease the sufferings of our dying friend.

Occasionally some soldier would steal from his post to gaze sadly for a brief interval at the chivalrous youth he had known and loved, and who had crowned his career by an act of such unselfish devotion.

For the most part he lay quite still, but now and again he would talk wildly and incoherently in the raving of delirium. Sometimes the speech would be of his English home and of friends unknown to us, but mostly his mind dwelt upon the events in Afghanistan.

After a while he spoke of Rex, and then the theme never once varied. Until that sorrowful night I never knew how well those two loved each other.

Repeatedly I begged Sara to retire within the tent, but she would not leave her post.

"I can do no good," she murmured pathetically; "but he will recover his reason before the end, and I would like to bid him farewell."

Thus the night slipped away, and morning found us still watching.

Meanwhile several events had taken place bearing directly upon our fortunes, but I did not learn of them until afterwards.

I noticed, however, with a kind of dull surprise, that there were no preparations for a renewal of the march, but I felt little interest in the matter.

A short while before the dawn Charlie had fallen into a troubled sleep, from which he had not yet awakened, and indeed the morning passed before he again opened his eyes.

Instantly it became clear that the end was at hand. He glanced from me to Sara, and smiled with the innocence of a little child.

"God bless you both," he murmured gently.—"Paul,

guard her with your life.—Good-bye, dear friends ; I am going to Rex. Tell them I did my duty.”

We pressed his hand. There was a feeble response. The smile still lingered on his face, but the light faded from his eyes ; he sighed heavily, and I knew that our gallant friend was dead.

Taking Sara by the arm I drew her gently away.

“ Come,” I whispered, “ it is over ; nothing can harm him more,” and yielding to my earnest entreaty she consented to enter the tent.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST STAND.

IT was not until after Charlie's death that I began seriously to wonder why the march had not been resumed with the advent of dawn, and I sent Ali to fetch the faithful sergeant, if haply he were still alive.

In a short time he came, and at sight of the dead officer bared his head in reverent grief.

"As true a gentleman as ever breathed," he said softly, "and kind-hearted. I never knew two kinder officers than this one and Mr. Pole. Ah, well! they were not parted long, and our turn will come soon."

"What is the meaning of this long halt? Why do we not push forward?"

The sergeant rubbed his chin perplexedly. "It's beyond me," he said; "but I fancy our old friend Akbar is up to his tricks again. Last evening he sent for the general and the brigadier to visit him; his camp is only half a mile away. It was given out that he wanted to make terms for our safe passage to Jelalabad."

"Did they go?"

"Yes, and are there still; we are waiting for their re-

turn. Listen ! what do you think of that as a message of peace ? ” as the report of a tremendous musketry fire rang out.

“ Sergeant,” I exclaimed, “ this is horrible ! If it were not for Miss Gurdon, I could wish that one of their bullets would find me.”

“ Not yet, sir,” he responded cheerily ; “ there is work to be done yet. But I must not stop here ; the make-believe truce is at an end.”

It was true. Once more the foe closed around us, and their fire became hotter and more deadly than ever.

Thus the long afternoon wore away, and the approach of night found us still fighting desperately to ward off the attacks of our unwearying opponents. Again and again we sallied forth, achieving by superhuman efforts a temporary measure of success ; but our numbers were few, and we were famishing from lack of food and drink.

Nor could we gather any tidings of our leaders, who, as we subsequently learned, were forcibly detained in Akbar’s camp, and at length it was resolved that come what might we would make a further effort to push on.

The chief officer left with us now was the gallant Brigadier Anquetil, and under his leadership the sorry procession advanced slowly up the gorge.

The road was a mass of ice ; the snow on the hills lay a foot deep ; but, to our surprise, we were free from the music of the Ghilzai jezails.

I looked sharply to right and left, hoping to find a favourable spot to put my plan into execution, as I was

resolved that at the first opportunity I would leave the direct route and seek safety amidst the hills.

But, alas! the horrors of the march were not yet over. The camp-followers, as usual, had forced their way to the front, but suddenly, with a cry of despair, they turned and rushed wildly down the defile, carrying the sepoy with them in their flight.

At the same instant from every hill flashed out a line of fire, and all order vanished. Taking hold of Sara's bridle I rode forward, and this is what I saw:—

Across the road had been constructed a barricade of branches and prickly bushes, behind which a crowd of fighting-men lay hidden.

This it was the sight of which had caused the hapless followers to retreat, only, however, to rush upon certain death. For now safety existed nowhere. The road behind was blocked; the hills were in possession of the enemy; ahead, the gorge was rendered almost impassable by this prickly wall.

"Trapped, Mr. Clevely," said the sergeant; "but, my faith, we will die hard."

The din was deafening. Shouts and yells and screams of pain filled the air, and our numbers were diminishing with every passing minute.

Ahead, the horsemen rode furiously at the thorny barrier, only to be hurled back. The Ghilzais emptied their rifles again and again into the midst of the maddened crowd, while a second body sprang, sword in hand, upon the rear.

I was in despair ; I could do nothing but keep Sara at my side, and die in her defence.

Then Mahoney's voice reached me. "This way, sir, this way—we've made a passage ; quick !"

"Take Miss Gurdon's bridle," I cried, catching sight of him—"Ali, hang on to me. Now !" and away we went through the broken barrier into the gorge beyond.

Behind us the shrieks of pain were heartrending, but by degrees they grew fainter, and finally ceased. The awful stillness in our rear was eloquent of the thoroughness with which the massacre had been carried out.

"Less than a hundred strong we are now, sir, and many of that number desperately wounded," said the sergeant, guessing my thoughts.

"We can put two of the poor fellows on my horse ; I will walk."

"And I also," exclaimed Sara eagerly. "Nay, Paul, do not try to dissuade me ; I am resolved."

Accordingly we both dismounted, and while the soldiers attended to the needs of their stricken comrades, we two trudged on laboriously hand in hand.

Sara's fortitude was marvellous, and inspired me with admiration. The physical obstacles alone might well have daunted the heart of a strong and courageous man ; but this girl, weak from insufficient nourishment, bowed down with grief at the loss of a fondly-loved mother and two dear friends, expecting every moment to be herself slain, having no hope of escape from a violent death, still preserved her equanimity.

No murmur of complaint passed her lips, no admission of weariness; patiently she pushed on with such assistance as I could furnish.

Early on the following morning we forded the Soorkhab River below the bridge, which was held by the enemy, and immediately afterwards came to a halt for the last time.

It was no longer possible to continue the march. In front the road was occupied by large bodies of the enemy, who also closed in behind us. In this dilemma we turned aside to the hills, on one of which we took up our post, prepared to make a final stand.

"Mr. Clevely," the sergeant whispered, "is there no chance of hiding the young lady? Take my word, it is certain death for her to stay here."

I knew that well, but what could be done?

"If by chance you could find a cave, she might yet be saved," the sergeant continued. "But you must go at once; it will be broad daylight soon."

"The attempt shall be made," I answered. "Good-bye, sergeant; God grant that you may come safely through it."

"It is all over with us, sir, but I hope the young lady's life will be spared," and he moved sorrowfully away.

In a few seconds my preparations were complete: a loonghee replaced my cap, an Afghan smock was thrown over my tunic, and I explained briefly to Sara the part we were about to play.

"Very good, Paul," she made answer—"I am in your hands; but were it not for my father's sake, I would gladly

stay here and die. After these days and nights of horror, I could welcome death as a deliverer."

Still she made no demur, but obeyed my instructions faithfully, and even before the handful of doomed men had taken up their stations, we were stealing away on our forlorn hope.

The situation was critical in the extreme. Our one chance, a small one at best, consisted in finding an unoccupied cave, and there hiding until the land should once more be wrapped in the darkness of night.

One immediate advantage we had, and of that I made the most. Every step removed us farther from the Afghans, who were hurrying up to the height we had just left, leaving our way clear.

The huge boulders, too, screened us effectually from observation: and though the ascent was both tedious and full of peril, my spirits gradually rose.

But the daylight was spreading; already the mountain peaks were tipped with orange and gold; ere long it would be impossible to hide ourselves.

Presently, in front of a perpendicular wall, along the base of which ran a narrow ledge, I spied a clump of bushes, and the sight gave me renewed hopes. Often I had noticed that, whether by accident or design, a similar breastwork protected the entrance to a cave. Might it not be so in this case?

Posting Sara and Ali behind a boulder, I glided forward as swiftly as was consistent with safety, and pushing aside the bushes, found, as I had more than half expected, a small hole, just large enough to admit of our entrance.

Without wasting time for exploring purposes, I rejoined the others, and, at the expense of a few cuts and bruises, led them to the spot.

"Kneel down behind the bush, and do not stir," I whispered; "it may be that some one is already there."

A cursory examination proved that my fears were groundless. The cave was merely a circular hole in the rock, shaped somewhat like a truncated cone lying on its side, with the truncated portion towards us.

It was dark and cold but dry, and moreover it concealed us from the eyes of our foes.

"Here," I said, "we shall be safe for a few hours; none will look for us here."

"Is it not strange that the sound of firing has ceased?" Sara asked.

"They are most likely parleying," I replied; "but I fear that little will come of it."

Then for a long time we remained without speaking, absorbed in painful reflections, until the silence was suddenly broken by a loud report.

"It is the beginning of the end," I observed despondingly: "the negotiations have failed."

The sounds of the firing, the shouts of the Afghans, the cries of pain, even the clash and ring of steel, came borne upwards to us on the still air. I peered out cautiously, moving the branches without noise, but nothing could be seen.

Only I knew that not far off a terrible struggle was taking place—a life-and-death fight, in which a handful

of famished men were bearing themselves bravely against innumerable odds. As in a vision I could see the gallant soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder awaiting the onslaught of the foe, or rushing with a stern cheer to hurl them backwards over the heights.

And as I lay there mentally picturing the unequal contest, I was seized with a longing desire to throw myself into the midst of the fray. My place was there by the side of that heroic but doomed band. My English blood ran riot in my veins, and I half drew the sword at my side.

Then a soft hand was laid gently on my arm, and the fit of delirium vanished. No! for a moment I had been mad with excitement, but Sara's touch calmed me.

"What could you do down there?" she asked; "you would only throw your life away."

I pressed her hand reassuringly, feeling that the words were true.

So we lay waiting in our hiding-place, while the noise became fainter and the firing more intermittent, until gradually it ceased, and all again was still.

Then I turned my face to the wall and wept, knowing that at last the Afghan leader's threat was fulfilled, and his vengeance satiated.

I looked back upon the events of the past few days, and wondered if it were not all a hideous nightmare. Was it credible that in one short week the great host which had left Cabul could really have vanished?

Alas, I could not deceive myself! There in the

mountain passes, stretching from the Afghan capital almost to our very feet, they lay dead but unburied, their corpses mutilated by the Afghan knives, and partly devoured by the loathsome vultures.

Our own dear ones, too, were there: Mrs. Gurdon, I hoped, resting quietly in the shallow grave we had hastily fashioned; while Rex and Charlie—ah well, their spirits would not suffer through the indignities heaped upon their dead bodies.

But stranger, acquaintance, and friend were alike plunged into one common abyss. All were gone—all! and of our own fate none could foretell the nature.

While I thus mused, Ali, with true Oriental fatalism, had abandoned himself to slumber. He was in the hands of Allah, who had rescued him in a marvellous manner from innumerable dangers. It was perhaps destined that he should yet live and return in safety to his own country. That certainly would make glad his heart. But if, on the other hand, it was fated he should die, well, was not Allah master of the hereafter?

And so the Mohammedan youth slept untroubled by doubts or fears, calmly resigned either to life or death, trusting himself with absolute confidence to his God.

After a time, too, I had the satisfaction of knowing that Sara had succumbed to the spirit of weariness, and for a brief period had lost consciousness of our miserable condition.

Once or twice I pushed my head outside cautiously, but all was still and deserted. As far as I could judge,



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Flinging himself on the ground, he drank long and steadily
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not a single Afghan was moving on the hillside. The butchery was complete, the plunder looted ; nothing now remained to be done.

Had it not been for our scarcity of provisions, I should not have despaired of successfully accomplishing the journey, as I possessed a fairly accurate notion of the route to Jelalabad.

But the little stock of food was almost exhausted, and it was in replenishing our store that I apprehended the greatest danger.

My intention was to regain the road directly upon the approach of dusk, and after a rapid night-march take to the hills again in the morning.

Accordingly at the end of the afternoon I awakened the other two, who had slept uninterruptedly, and shared out the scanty rations.

"How selfish of us !" Sara exclaimed ; "I believe you have not slept all day."

"I have been busy making plans, but at our next halting-place I intend sleeping the whole time. You and Ali shall take it in turns to watch. But let us hasten ; the night will soon be here, and I have no wish that the darkness should find us still amongst the hills."

"Which way are we going ?"

"We must turn back until we strike the road. It is unfortunate, but I dare not risk leading you further into the hills ; the danger is too great."

Having finished the frugal meal, we made our preparations, which were of the simplest character, consisting

merely in fastening ourselves together by means of a rope that had formed part of the baggage.

The ascent had been difficult and tedious enough, but the going down was infinitely more troublesome until we had covered half the distance. Then what had hitherto been nothing more than a goat-track now broadened into a footpath, which presently forked—one part leading towards the Soorkhab River, the other inclining in the direction of Gundamuk, which was also our course.

At the junction of the two paths we halted, while I untied the rope and handed it to Ali, at the same time offering a few words of admonition.

“Remember,” I said softly, “there must be no noise. Whatever happens, remain silent, and trust in me.”

Taking Sara by the hand, and bidding Ali follow closely, I began the descent, and a few minutes’ sharp walking brought us to the road.

The night was now beginning to close in, and I noted with joy that the heavens were overcast, the stars hidden, and the light of the moon quenched.

This was an advantage for which I had scarcely dared to hope, as for several nights now the placid rays of the moon had made the earth radiant with her beauty.

Another circumstance, too, caused me a feeling of satisfaction, though it added to our physical discomfort. This was the beginning of a storm which promised to increase in severity, and I judged it unlikely that the natives would leave the shelter of their hovels to brave the elements without some definite object in view.

Reasoning thus, I pushed on with greater confidence, eager to cover as much ground as possible while Sara remained fresh, knowing full well that she must soon tire with this unusual exercise.

We had walked about half an hour when the loud barking of dogs betokened the neighbourhood of a village. It lay, however, at some distance from the road on our left hand, and did not cause me much uneasiness, though I took the precaution of bearing more to the right, in order to take advantage of the cover which in case of need the huge boulders would afford.

Thus we proceeded without speaking, save for a word of warning now and then from me, until I calculated we must have put six miles between the village and ourselves.

Sara was now growing manifestly fatigued, but she would not hear of resting.

"No! let us keep going, Paul, until the dawn," she whispered, in reply to my question if she would halt awhile; "there will be plenty of time for rest when the daylight comes." And as this was without doubt the wisest course, we continued walking.

The rain had now ceased, but the wind blew a hurricane which, coming from the rear, helped to drive us along. As yet no rift had appeared through the clouds; we were still shrouded in darkness.

Ali walked behind us with the noiselessness of a cat and the regularity of a machine, while I knew that his ears were open to the slightest sign of danger.

But the night passed and nothing of note occurred.

Besides ourselves, no one was stirring; not even a night-bird flapped its wings, nor did a wild animal cross our path.

At last the dawn began to break, cold and grey, and I could not feel sorry that the long tramp was coming to an end. We had made marvellous progress, but Sara's steps were feeble and uncertain; she hung heavily upon my arm, and it was patent that she could not go much further.

"Courage!" I exclaimed; "we will rest soon. Ali, the clouds are lifting; keep a sharp look-out for any stray bushes on the hillside."

"What the sahib seeks is yonder," the Mohammedan responded calmly, pointing with his hand towards the towering rocks; "shall I climb up?"

I hesitated. We could easily have travelled in safety another hour, but Sara was weak, almost fainting; another hour's walking would prostrate her completely, so I decided that we would avail ourselves of the first hiding-place.

"Go, Ali," I said, "but be cautious; leave everything here except your knife."

Ali grinned, showing his teeth, and unslinging his burden set out.

I had taken my sheep-skin and placed it on a rock in order that Sara might sit comfortably, when she cried,—

"Listen, Paul! that is surely the sound of a running stream; let us find it. At this moment I would give the whole world for a cup of water."

"You are right, Sara—it is a stream ; it cannot be a yard or two away. There, look, it runs behind yonder boulder."

In a short time I had taken a vessel from Ali's load, and held it, filled with cold, sparkling water, to the girl's parched lips. Then I too drank, greedily, without stint, and felt equal to another long tramp.

"It is an omen of success," I observed ; "and here comes Ali with more good news."

Before hearing his report I pointed to the spring, saying,—

"Drink, Ali ; it will unlock your tongue."

The youth needed no second bidding, but flinging himself at full length on the ground, drank long and steadily, as if he would lay bare the bed of the stream.

Then motioning upward he said,—

"Sahib, there is a cave behind the bush, and the path is easy."

"What of our enemies, Ali ? Are you sure that the cave is empty ?"

"I think so, sahib. There was no sound ; I went in. The place is large ; you can walk about."

"I have little inclination to walk about at present," I answered, smiling ; "however, we shall see," and bidding Sara lean all her weight on me, I followed him slowly.

The lad's statement proved correct : the ascent offered comparatively little difficulty, and in a short time we stood facing the new lodgings, in which we were to experience a fresh and surprising adventure.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ADVENTURE IN THE CAVE.

THE cave, as far as could be discerned in the semi-gloom, was a spacious one with a lofty and vaulted roof; while the wall opposite the entrance was broken, displaying a narrow passage which might or might not go back a long distance.

Leaving that to be decided later, I cast about for a convenient spot where I could spread a dry rug for Sara, and happily I found a specially suitable place without much trouble.

This was in the left-hand corner of the cave, where a huge rock jutting out considerably from the side wall helped to form a snug little compartment in which she might enjoy as much privacy as she had in the now-discarded tent.

As there was no physical exercise immediately before us, I resolved to dispense with supper, and deal out what was almost the last ration before starting afresh.

To this Sara cheerfully consented, and bidding her dismiss all fears from her mind, I turned to Ali, who had undertaken the first watch.

No word had yet passed my lips, when we were thrown into the most violent state of alarm by hearing a deep groan close to us, followed by a faint voice feebly begging in Pushtoo for water.

I moved cautiously in the direction from whence the sound came, and there behind a projecting rock beheld dimly the figure of a man.

The poor wretch was manifestly in great pain; he appeared to have scarcely sufficient strength to articulate the one word "Water," which nevertheless he continued to repeat.

Now we possessed only the one drinking-vessel, but, savage foe as this man no doubt was, I could not stand and watch his dying agony without attempting in some measure to relieve his distress.

Nor would Sara, who had hurriedly joined us, have permitted such a course.

"The poor man asks for water," she said; "is it not so, Paul?—Ali, bring the water quickly."

At the sound of her voice, which echoed like sweet music through the cave, the dying Afghan slowly turned his head, and I knew that his face was illuminated by a smile of hope.

I bent over and placed the precious liquid to his lips.

"Drink," I said; "we are friends—we will do you no harm."

Swallowing a few drops, he murmured devoutly,—

"Allah be praised," and as if revived, drank again more deeply.

"Where are you hurt?" I asked; "we will carry you into the light, and bind up your wounds."

He made a gesture of dissent.

"No; leave me to die in peace. But you are good, kind Allah will reward you."

He lay back motionless, one hand pressed firmly against his heart.

I thought he was dead, and begged Sara to retire.

"You are losing your rest for naught," I said; "nothing more can be done."

But as she moved away, the Afghan, with a piercing shriek, rose to a sitting posture. At first he waved his arms wildly, but at length clutching his turban he tore it from his head.

For a few minutes his frenzy was terrible, but it was clearly the fictitious strength sometimes given to a dying man.

"Dogs, dogs!" he shouted violently; "they are mine—mine, I say. My hand won them; my sword shall guard them. Ah, Uktar, is it you? That is your portion," and he made a downward sweep with one arm at an imaginary foe.

But his powers were rapidly becoming exhausted; he would have fallen backward had not Ali supported him.

Once more I turned to Sara, who stood irresolutely at my side, fascinated by the tragic scene.

"Go," I whispered; "the end is at hand," and I was thankful when she glided silently away.

Then turning to the dying man, I moistened his lips and waited.

He was still talking, but quietly now, and the words failed to reach me.

Presently, however, he burst into a harsh, grating laugh of mingled bitterness and triumph, and pressed the turban into my hand.

"Hide it, stranger," he cried—"hide it quickly. All are there, every one; I counted them.—Ah, Uktar, may the crows pick your bones clean!"

This time there was no mistaking.

"Dead, sahib," Ali exclaimed, straightening the body on the ground, and placing the arms close to the sides; "his spirit has returned to Allah."

"And I must get some more water while the day is yet young."

Throwing the turban on one side, I noticed that as it touched the ground it gave forth a hard sound, but I had scant leisure for investigation.

Pushing the protecting bush on one side, I stood on the hill. The sun had risen in grand but tumultuous glory. Above my head the ragged clouds, edged as with fire, were swept hither and thither by a fierce wind. It seemed as if the tempest, still held in leash, were straining to burst its bonds asunder.

After glancing swiftly to the right and left, I hastened down to the stream, and having refilled the vessel, went back to my companion.

"There will be a big storm, sahib," Ali said as I re-entered the cave; "we are fortunate in being well housed."

"You are right. By the way, I wonder if our friend

yonder possessed anything in the shape of food. It is just possible. Search, while I have a look at his turban."

I picked it up, and ripping it open with my knife stood staring in amazement.

My residence at Runjit Singh's court had taught me something concerning precious stones, and here in this piece of greasy cloth were stowed away eleven flaming rubies, worth at the lowest estimate a moderate fortune.

Yet, with a full knowledge of their value, I did not deem them of such importance as the bag which Ali now brought me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Ottah, sahib; enough for several days."

"Then we are saved, Ali. We will make a feast. I will see if your mistress is asleep."

At the first word Sara came forth.

"Your voice is joyous, Paul," she said, "as if your heart were glad."

"It is. See, we have found two good things—life and a fortune."

She turned her head towards the spot where the dead man lay.

"And they spring from death," she observed simply.

"It is but another example of the universal law—life from death. But we will not moralize; let us eat," and I distributed a portion of the ottah.

This simple meal in the gloomy cavern was the first bit of comfort we had experienced since leaving Cabul, and had it not been for the horrors of the past few days, we

might have been roused into a feeling of cheerfulness. But the memory of the dear ones lost to us for all time kept us sad, and we ate in silence the food thus providentially obtained.

The jewels, too, occupied my thoughts ; I was at a loss how to carry them. If we fell into the hands of the Afghans, I should be rigorously searched, either dead or alive, and the same thing would happen to Ali.

The difficulty was solved by Sara, to whom I explained the dilemma.

"Give them to me," she said ; "I will hide them. They will be safer in my custody than in yours." And I gladly passed them to her.

Then we separated once more, and having given Ali strict orders to waken me if any danger threatened, I lay down thoroughly exhausted. Outside, the wind howled in a fit of fury ; overhead, the clouds burst in a sharp clap of thunder. But I heeded not the war of the elements ; my brain was heavy with sleep.

For several hours I lay like a log, dead to every sense, buried in complete oblivion. It was as if a time-piece had run down, and my sleep was kindly nature's winding-up process.

When finally I awoke, the faithful Ali was still keeping watch, and Sara stood bending over me.

Immediately I knew that something unusual was taking place. Rising hastily, I was about to speak, when a loud report was heard, and the very cave seemed to tremble with the violence of the explosion.

When the noise had died away, I asked Sara how long the storm had raged thus furiously.

"Nearly an hour," she answered, and rallied me upon my sleeping powers.

Crossing the cave I put one foot outside ; but Ali pulled me back.

"It is not safe, sahib : more than one big piece of rock has already fallen ; others will follow."

To this warning I owed my life. The youth had barely finished speaking when a heavy body, which I judged to be a massive boulder, came crashing down. It struck the bush at its roots, cutting through them, and bush and rock went together headlong to the bottom.

"This will serve to keep the tribesmen at home," I said lightly ; "they will not venture abroad to-day. Still it will be inconvenient for us if the storm does not go down with the sun."

Soon afterwards came another clap, louder and more near than the preceding one.

Sara clasped my hand, saying in manifest agitation,—

"Do you think we are safe, Paul ? It seems to me as if at any moment these walls might fall and crush us."

I strove to calm her fears, though in secret my uneasiness was not much less than hers, but that of course I would not allow her to see.

The din by this time was so terrific that all thoughts of sleep were banished ; but Ali, wrapped in his poshteen, lay down on a shelving rock just inside the cave to rest his limbs.

After much persuasion Sara was induced to return to

her original compartment, where for a greater part of the time I bore her company, leaving her only for an occasional visit to Ali.

The storm had been in progress for some hours when it suddenly ceased. The wind dropped to a dead calm; the roll of the thunder was at an end; a strange oppressive silence took the place of the mighty uproar.

Sara clung to my arm tenaciously.

"Paul," she whispered, "this stillness frightens me; it is as if nature were gathering up her energies for some terrible blow. What is about to happen?"

Swiftly came the answer to her question. Across the entrance of the cave there sprang a flame of living fire; the ground rocked to and fro beneath our feet; there was a mighty creaking and wrenching—a slipping of riven rocks—a loud noise as if the old Norse gods were hammering on their gigantic anvils, and then we were in total darkness.

I called aloud for Ali, but no answering cry came back. I pushed forth my arms; they encountered the cold rock. A horrible fear devoured me—the fear that we were buried alive.

Sara was pressing closely against me, and her limbs trembled.

"What is it, Paul?" she asked; "has the roof fallen in?"

"That is what I fear. But what of yourself? are you unhurt?"

"Yes, I am untouched. But our poor Ali—O Paul, he may be lying crushed under those cruel rocks," and she sobbed aloud.

I knew not what answer to make for her comfort, since I firmly believed that the body of the youthful Mohammedan was fixed, a shapeless mass, amidst the fallen rocks.

Yet for her sake did I simulate hope.

"It is likely enough that he has escaped," I said; "he had sufficient time to gain the open."

"But cannot we do anything, Paul?" and she pushed with her delicate hands against the rocks, as if to force them asunder.

"You must be brave, Sara," I said; "Ali is either dead or free, and in either case beyond our help. Between him and us there is a solid wall which we cannot pierce."

Nevertheless she continued to cry aloud, and in order to pacify her I raised my voice with hers, but, alas! without result, and after a time even Sara acknowledged the futility of the proceedings.

Dead or free, Ali was lost to us, as, even if he had survived the earthquake, he must inevitably fall a prey to some Afghan bullet.

But now our own danger asserted itself, and once more I had to face the dismal question, "Were we buried alive?"

We were most assuredly cut off from the face of the hill, and my sole hope was that the narrow passage I had seen bored the mountain like a tunnel. If it were not so, then we were doomed, without a chance of rescue.

I was still musing on the horrors of the situation, when Sara, who had ceased calling upon Ali, said in a tone of affright, "Paul, if Ali cannot come to us, neither can we get through to him."

This truth had only now occurred to her, and it was easy to tell by the trembling in her voice into what a depth of anguish she was plunged by the conception.

"True, Sara; nevertheless that does not prevent our getting out another way," I responded. "There is a narrow tunnel which no doubt pierces the hill, and by its means we shall make our escape."

I spoke confidently, yet my heart quaked when I remembered upon what scanty foundations this hope was based; but the words renewed Sara's courage, and that at present was the chief point to be considered.

"Let us start at once, Paul," she urged; "after a second shock we may find the passage barred."

This was excellent advice, and I hastened to follow it; but before setting out we were confronted with a further and most disheartening misfortune. The ottah taken from the dead Afghan had been left with Ali.

The blow was so severe that it paralyzed all my energies, and it needed Sara's entreaties to rouse me from a sullen apathy.

The jewels were safe, the ottah lost! How gladly would I have bartered every ruby in Sara's possession for a handful of the missing food!

I groped my way to the passage in a kind of dull despair. Both nature and man were against us; how could we prevail?

But the touch of the brave girl's hand restored my spirits; I grew ashamed of the cowardly fears which had for a moment conquered me.

The tunnel proved to be exceedingly narrow, so much so, indeed, that we were obliged to follow each other in Indian file; but inside, the intense darkness was somewhat mitigated. The floor was merely a mass of irregular rocks and stones, in places piled so high that we could barely squeeze between them and the roof.

I had now given up all hope of escape, though still from time to time speaking brave words to my companion. Almost at every step I expected to find our further progress barred by an immovable wall, but I made no mention of this to Sara, who toiled along uncomplainingly.

Twice we stopped to rest, and on the latter of these occasions I forced her to drink a little of the wine which was still left, pretending to refresh myself in a similar manner.

A minute or two later I regretted not having drunk in reality. We had just made a fresh start where the ground was fairly level, when I was horrified at beholding, a few yards away, a pair of red, gleaming eyes.

"Do not be alarmed," I whispered. "I am going to fire; there is a wild beast in front of us."

To what species the animal belonged I could not in the gloom define, but judged that it was most probably a mountain lion. Nearer and nearer it came, and levelling my pistol I pulled the trigger.

There was a fitful flash, and I had scarcely time to realize that the weapon had missed fire when the animal was upon me. The horrid eyes glared fiercely into mine; the hot breath blew upon my cheek, and I was absolutely defenceless.

The pistol had failed ; there was no time to use my knife, and I gripped the animal by the throat in a mad, desperate effort to throttle it.

"The knife, Sara !" I gasped. "Reach my knife and stab the beast quickly ; use all your strength."

I dared not turn my head, but there was a clutch at my waist, and then the gleam of steel glanced before me.

The space was so confined that the animal could not exert its full strength, and in spite of gaping wounds and loss of blood I held my grip tenaciously. Again and again the courageous girl raised the blade, now reeking with blood, and drove it home with desperate energy into the beast's side, and at every stroke the infuriated animal tried wildly to shake itself free from my grasp. The blood covered my face ; my left arm was gashed by its sharp fangs ; I was growing faint, but still my fingers retained their hold.

But the creature's struggles, too, became less fierce ; the blood poured from its sides, and now the knife found a vital part.

"Once more, Sara, to make certain," I panted, and then, as the dead animal rolled over, I fell with it.

Dropping the bloody knife, Sara felt for the flask, and held it to my lips. Then with some portion of her dress she bandaged my wounded arm as well as the darkness would allow, sobbing quietly the while.

"Do not grieve," I said ; "I am not seriously hurt. We will rest a few minutes, and all will be well."

"O Paul, how much I owe to you !" she cried.

"Nay," I answered, "you have settled all your debts. Have you not just saved my life?"

"Which but for me would never have been placed in jeopardy."

This may have been true, but I would not allow her to talk thus; and, moreover, time was precious. We could not afford to waste the moments, and although the pain of my wounds was excruciating, I picked up the knife and dragged myself with difficulty over the carcass of my late antagonist.

Sara followed closely, and during a long distance we pursued our journey in silence, as, in truth, I was far too weak for much speech. My head swam with dizziness, and I continued to suffer torture from my injured limb.

Still I kept possession of my senses, and after a time hope sprang up afresh in my heart. The close atmosphere of the gloomy tunnel was dispelled by a cold wind which fanned our cheeks refreshingly, and presently, only a few yards off, I perceived a point of light.

"Look, Sara!" I cried exultingly, "there is freedom at last!"

The sight revived our drooping energies; we pushed on at a more rapid pace, until once again we looked with blinking eyes at the blessed daylight.

"Thank God!" Sara exclaimed reverently. "I cannot believe He has spared us thus far for naught. Now, indeed, I begin to hope."

I gazed at the rugged cliffs beneath us, and did not answer. A great wave of dread, of superstitious fear swept

suddenly over my heart, and with difficulty I saved myself from falling headlong, so thoroughly were my nerves unstrung.

Our little company had set out from Cabul six in number, and but two remained. One by one four had departed to that other world from which they now seemed beckoning towards me. Weak from my wounds, weak from hunger, I stood wellnigh on the brink of the grave; was it wonderful that I should despair of living?

Yet for Sara's sake I must not yield; my last breath should be drawn in her service. Strong in this fancy, I fastened the rope round our waists, and began the descent.

At the foot of the hill stretched a sheltered valley, through which ran a broad stream. The descent occupied a considerable time, as nowhere was there more than a vestige of a path, and my injured arm was a great inconvenience.

Still somehow it was finally accomplished, and we halted by the side of the stream, from which I greedily drank.

Then I tried to rise for the purpose of proceeding, but could not. My legs tottered under me; the earth grew dark. I knew that I was losing consciousness, and fought hard against the deadening influence, but in vain; my eyes closed, my mind became a blank.

What length of time I remained in this stupor must be a matter of conjecture, but when my senses returned I was lying at the foot of the hill, and save for myself the valley was deserted: Sara was gone!

CHAPTER XXII.

IN JELALABAD.

“**H**EY, mon, I tell ye the laddie will get the turn nicely.”

The speaker was evidently labouring under some excitement, to which the pronounced accent was due.

“‘Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of Scotia!’ Saunders, I pray thee, be not one of those

‘That palter with us in a double sense—
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.’”

“He will recover, Captain Gurdon, his blood is vigorous; though how he could have survived that nasty gash across the head I cannot tell.”

“Yet the riddle is easily solved, friend Saunders. There were no doctors present to try their skill upon him.”

Then came a good-humoured laugh, in which the Scotchman joined, and afterwards the sound of softly-retreating footsteps.

I heard all this, but it had no personal meaning for me. My brain was only partially awake; it registered sounds, and that was all.

Once, subsequent to this, I felt a cool hand laid lightly on my brow, but I had no wish, no desire, to burst the fetters which held me in a state of semi-consciousness.

It was told me later that I lay several weeks in this condition—motionless, with closed eyes, giving no sign of life, save by a pulsation so weak as to be barely perceptible.

Even when my eyes opened, and I could look upon the familiar faces bending over me, my senses received no impression save that of a vague, ill-defined pleasure. In some manner it was borne in upon me that I had nothing to fear, but at that point my ability to grasp ideas ceased.

One day I lay nearly an hour staring with wide-opened eyes at two men who sat near me. It pleased me that they should be there. Their presence afforded a sense of security, but the sensation had its origin in instinct rather than in reason, since I did not know them.

The knowledge of previous events came back only by very slow degrees, and the first step in the process was my recognition of Captain Gurdon.

He entered the room one morning, stepping softly, and leaned over the bed. By a sudden working of the brain a portion of my memory was, as it were, set free, and I knew him.

I would not have you imagine that all the past was instantly bared. Many a tedious day elapsed before that happened, but I knew him as a friend, somehow associated with my former life.

I could not speak, but my eyes smiled, and I made an effort to stretch out my hand.

He pressed it gently, as if fearing to hurt me, and I saw that his face was sad.

Then he called across the room, and a second man came forward. Of him, too, I now had a confused recollection, but blurred as yet and indistinct.

"His senses have returned," said the captain excitedly; "I am certain that he recognized me just now.—Paul, do you know me?"

Again I smiled, not having the power of speech.

The other man now interposed, speaking with the voice of authority,—

"He must not be excited; it is better that you should withdraw for a time. I will give him a draught, and tell Brader he must not come to-day."

After this my consciousness, up to a certain point, rapidly recovered strength, inasmuch as I soon distinctly recollected Brader, and Saunders the Scotch surgeon, who behind a rugged exterior concealed a woman's tenderness.

But the past remained hidden, and my new old friends, acting under the surgeon's instructions, forbore all reference to it.

During this period the captain's suspense must have been very terrible, and, curiously enough, I felt that he did well to be sad, although I had forgotten the reason.

But a day at length arrived when the flood-gates of memory were set wide open, and in the following manner.

One morning my three friends entered the room together. In his arms the doctor carried a bundle, which he set out on the bed, while they all watched me intently.

The sight of it stirred a feeble feeling of curiosity in my brain, but nothing more. Two of the articles, a loonghee and a coarse smock, were covered with congealed blood, while the latter presented wide, gaping rents. Next to these was a soiled tunic, also slashed and blood-besmeared, and it was upon this garment that my gaze dwelt longest.

The eyes of the three men devoured me, and over the doctor's face there stole by degrees a troubled expression.

He darted a swift glance at the captain, who asked gently,—

“Paul, do you not recognize these things?”

I looked upon the speaker, striving vainly to fix the association between him and that blood-stained garment. Why did he speak so sadly? Why had the ravages of care so deeply furrowed his brow? And, above all, what connection had these things with that tattered tunic?

I touched it with my fingers, and the contact seemed to strengthen my brain. I rubbed it lightly, as if to draw out its hidden secret. In the breast pocket lay a flask empty. I passed my hand over the band; in one corner it pressed against a hard substance.

Then I knew.

The tunic dropped from my trembling fingers, and I lay back with closed eyes, thinking. How should I tell him the dreadful truth?

The surgeon leaned over hastily, feeling my pulse with practised fingers.

I looked at him steadily, saying faintly,—

"Leave me alone with the captain for ten minutes."

The request must have seemed strange, but whispering a few words to the others, he withdrew, taking Brader with him.

I dared not look at Captain Gurdon, but motioned toward the tunic, which he placed in my hands.

Holding up the corner of the band, I said huskily,—

"Rip this open; it will tell you all." Then I covered my face, for sewn inside the piece of cloth was his dead wife's locket.

Presently the sound of his voice came to me,—

"Is my darling wife really dead, Paul?"

I inclined my head.

"Killed by the sword?"

"No; she died on the march—of cold and weakness, I think. We buried her before resuming the journey."

This simple statement affected him powerfully.

"Thank you," he said. "I pray God that the Afghans have not disturbed her dear remains. And Sara, my pretty Sara! is she dead too? Tell me all, dear friend."

Half an hour previously this question would have possessed no meaning, but now my memory projected itself without an effort to the scene in the cave.

"I cannot say," I answered. "It may be that she still lives, a prisoner amongst the Afghans."

Then my voice became choked with womanish sobs. The strain had been too great; I could do nothing but weep.

It was pitiful to lie there helplessly, and live again the ghastly days that were past. Each separate horror came

upon me with a fresh shock. The successive deaths of my friends haunted my imagination. The incidents, piecing themselves together, formed a panorama which compelled my attention.

But the greatest, the most intense grief was caused by the uncertainty as to Sara's fate. I carried my mind back to the escape from the cave, and the subsequent descent into the valley. Thus far all was clear, and I could distinctly recollect drinking at the stream. After that came a blank. I had doubtless fainted, but what had occurred during the period of my unconsciousness?

Sara had disappeared, but how? After long pondering I came to this conclusion. Alarmed at the state of insensibility into which I had fallen, and my death-like appearance, Sara had probably set off with the deliberate intention of obtaining aid, and had fallen into the hands of the Afghans.

This view considerably raised my spirits, as I felt convinced that her savage captors would hold her as a hostage for their own safety, in case the British arms should once more prove triumphant.

The only drawback to my satisfaction was the fear that she might have been killed at the first onset, but this aspect of the case I resolutely banished.

The captain did not come again that day; but when the surgeon paid his usual visit, I spoke to him.

"Tell Captain Gurdon not to despair," I said. "I have good hopes that his daughter is still alive, but I cannot talk now."

"All right, lad," answered the worthy surgeon; "the captain shall have the message. And now I wish you to sleep. Your brain has had sufficient excitement for one day."

Having rearranged the tumbled bedclothes, he gave me a draught, and I speedily fell into a sound sleep, which lasted for many hours.

After this long rest I felt stronger, and equal to narrating the story of my adventures.

Accordingly the next morning Saunders brought the two others with him, and after a cordial greeting I proceeded with the tale.

First I acquainted Captain Gurdon with his wife's strange presentiment, and repeated the message which she had entrusted to me. Then I told of Umran Khan's unvarying kindness and significant warning, after which I rapidly outlined the chief incidents which induced our chiefs to sign the disastrous treaty.

"Better, far better, to have died fighting at Cabul," he declared, and the others unhesitatingly confirmed his opinion.

Then, with an occasional pause, I went on with the pitiful recital, describing Mrs. Gurdon's death and burial, Rex's desperate bravery, and the heroic action which cost Charlie his life.

"Noble lads, both!" murmured the captain; while Brader turned his head aside, unable to control his grief.

Quickly sketching the latter part of the retreat, and the final stand near the Soorkhab River, I hastened to the inci-

dents in the cave, describing the Afghan's death, the earthquake, Ali's uncertain fate, and the struggle with the wild beast.

"Soon after that," I concluded, "my memory begins to fail. By some means we managed to reach the valley at the foot of the hill, and there I fainted."

"Fainted!" growled Saunders, "and no wonder. Your injuries were serious enough to have killed you twice over."

"Saunders feels aggrieved," remarked the irrepressible lieutenant. "The very fact of your living is a severe slap in the face for medical science."

"Take no notice of him, Paul, but tell us what you imagine happened to Miss Sara," the surgeon said.

Thereupon I explained my theory of the disappearance, and had the pleasure of finding that they considered it a plausible one.

"Now," I said, "I am curious to learn how it comes to pass that I am lying here, instead of bleaching on yonder hills."

"Can you recollect nothing after missing Sara?"

"I have a dim knowledge of wandering on, of drinking at the stream now and again, of resting sometimes behind the rocks; but the picture in my mind is very hazy, and becomes suddenly blotted out."

"It is plain that you travelled a considerable distance, and as chance would have it, in the right direction. You must know that after the annihilation of the Cabul force, Akbar, elated by his success, resolved on treating us in

similar fashion. Naturally we were aware of his design, and scouting parties were sent out every day to report the movements of his men. By the last of these your body was discovered at the bottom of a gorge and brought into Jelalabad. No one, however, with the exception of Mr. Saunders, believed you had the slightest chance of recovering, and indeed, humanly speaking, it is to his unremitting care that you owe your life."

I pressed the doctor's hand warmly, failing to find suitable words in which to express my thanks.

"Hoot, lad, the captain is but joking," he said gruffly. "Your recovery is owing to temperate living and a thick skull;" whereupon the lieutenant gravely asked if the latter part of the remark was to be looked upon in the light of a Scotch compliment.

"But you have not told me how Akbar fared," I interposed, "though I judge he has not yet succeeded in driving you from Jelalabad."

"No; the nut proved harder to crack than he thought. We have held our own easily, and now whatever chance he may have once possessed is at an end. General Pollock, with a fresh army, is within a day's march of us."

"*En route* for Cabul?"

"I devoutly hope so," and the bitterness of tone betrayed that he was thinking of his dead wife and missing daughter.

"But there will be no marching for you yet awhile," observed Saunders. "You will be a prisoner here for the next three months."

"Three months, doctor!" I gasped; "impossible. Who will seek for Sara if I am shut up here?"

"That matter we will talk over another time; at present you had better recruit your strength in sleep."

"That is sound advice, Paul," said the lieutenant; "and I will give you a couplet from the immortal bard which shall yield fresh comfort,—

‘True hope is swift, and flies with swallows’ wings;
Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings.’

Do you follow me?"

"Yes," I answered smiling, and bade him farewell.

"Do not make yourself uneasy, Paul," the captain said, before going out. "If Sara has been taken prisoner, depend upon it no harm will happen to her."

This also would have been my belief had it not been for the circumstance of the jewels. The captain based his hopes upon the assumption that the Afghans would hold Sara to ransom; but what if in the meantime they discovered the rubies? How long after that would her life be spared?

However, I refrained from expressing my fears, not having the heart to plunge the bereaved man into still deeper grief.

The next evening Brader looked in upon me for a few minutes.

"Pollock has arrived," he said; "did you hear the music and firing? That bandmaster of ours must be a humorist; he played the regiments in to the tune of ‘Oh, but ye’ve

been lang in coming.' The fellows stared, I can tell you; it was a rich joke."

"When do they start for Cabul?" I asked eagerly.

"Nothing is known as yet; but if it depends upon General Pollock, we shall waste no time.

'He is a soldier fit to stand by Cæsar,
And give direction.'

By the way, what a pity it is that the Afghans have no translation of Shakespeare! What an appropriate quotation to place in their mouths,—

'We have scotched the snake, not killed it—
She'll close and be herself; whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.'

Our men are simply spoiling for a fight. But I must not stay longer; make haste and get well."

He left me with a cheery smile, which seemed to linger like a gleam of sunlight in the dull room.

And at this time I was in sore need of consolation. Despite Captain Gurdon's reassuring words, I could not banish my uneasiness concerning Sara.

Had she died of hunger and cold on these hills, or been ruthlessly struck down by some wandering robber? Either event was extremely probable, while at the very best I could hope for nothing more favourable than a dreary captivity.

Day after day I tossed helplessly on the bed revolving these thoughts, but unable to move hand or foot towards effecting her rescue, if by chance she were still alive.

Brader and the captain oftentimes came in to see me,

and from them I gathered the surprising intelligence that General Pollock's army still lay encamped outside the town, and that no orders had been issued for the resumption of the march.

"What is the meaning of this long halt?" I inquired one day. "Have not the men regained their strength?"

Captain Gurdon smiled rather bitterly.

"The poor fellows are dying by scores," he said. "The camp is extremely unhealthy."

" 'This sickness doth infect
The very life-blood of our enterprise.' "

Still, Paul,

' Ill blows the wind that profits nobody.' "

You will yet march to Cabul with us. Saunders told the captain this morning that you are to sit up for an hour to-morrow."

"That is so," assented Captain Gurdon; "but take my advice, and be not over-venturesome. A relapse now might prove fatal."

"You forget the doctor," I answered, with a smile. "He will give me little chance of overtaking my strength;" and they both laughed.

On the following morning, to my great delight, Dr. Saunders wrapped me in a shawl, and placed me carefully on a low chair which he had borrowed for my use.

Here I sat for the greater part of two hours, when he carried me back to bed, and I immediately fell into a natural and healthy slumber.

From that day my progress towards recovery was steady and constant, until the time came when, leaning on Brader's arm, I actually took a little walk out of doors.

After this I went out every day with one or another of my three friends, and at the end of the second week was sufficiently strong to travel without support.

The officers, several of whom I had known in Cabul, were exceedingly kind, vieing with each other in their considerate attentions to me.

But as the days slipped away and nothing was heard of Sara, I became more and more restless, and secretly resolved that I would set off in search of her at the first favourable opportunity.

It was now the middle of July, and still the army lay inactive in the Jelalabad valley. One or two expeditions had been organized, with the object of chastising the refractory tribes in the immediate neighbourhood, and several villages had been set in flames, but the major portion of the troops still remained in the original encampment.

This delay was inexplicable. Officers and men alike grumbled, while poor Captain Gurdon gradually lost all heart.

All kinds of rumours were bandied about. Some said we were waiting for still further reinforcements, whilst, according to the assertions of others, the projected march on Cabul was to be abandoned.

But in this statement the majority utterly refused to believe. That the "Avenging Army," as Pollock's force was termed, should return without striking a blow, with-

out wiping out the stain of disgrace from our tarnished flag, was monstrous, incredible, unworthy of the great English nation.

Meanwhile I had fully recovered my strength, and with the assistance of the surgeon had nearly completed my arrangements for leaving Jelalabad, when one morning Brader came running up full of excitement.

"At last, Paul, at last!" he cried.

"Come, put my armour on; give me my staff."

Doctor" (to Saunders, who was standing close by),—

"The *knaves* fly from me;
Come, sir, despatch."

"A truce to your mummery," growled the surgeon, "and tell us in simple language the reason for your madness."

"Exactly. In the words of the divine bard,—

'I will a round, unvarnished tale deliver.'
'The whirligig of time brings in his revenges.'

We have received the order to march."

I flung my cap joyously in the air, and even the self-contained Saunders permitted himself to unbend a little on hearing the good news.

"This will change your plans," he said when Brader had left us. "It will serve your purpose better now to go with the army. If your theory is correct, the Afghans will carry Miss Gurdon to the other side of the country, and place a considerable distance between her and our men."

"Then what do you advise?"

"Keep with the troops until you reach Cabul. Question closely any of the natives who may fall into our hands, and let it be known that a substantial reward will be paid if Miss Sara be given up."

"But suppose that we gain no tidings?"

"If we can learn nothing on the march, I shall begin to fear the worst. But in any case no results can come from prowling about here."

"Then I will do as you counsel, and somehow I believe that all will yet be well."

"I trust so," he answered slowly. "If not, we shall lose another of our little company;" and I knew that he was referring to Sara's father, who just then approached us.

"I see that Brader has already told you the news," he exclaimed. "Yes, it is quite true. I have just come in from the camp, where the men are wild with joy. Judging by their conversation, it will go hard with the Afghans, if the latter are unwise enough to risk a fight."

"Which they most assuredly will do," I answered. "The Ghilzais will force Akbar to pit his strength against us."

"All the better," said Saunders; "it will make our work so much the easier." And then the captain, with a promise to see me later in the day, went to his duties.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GLAD TIDINGS.

IT was the twenty-third of August 1842 when at length General Pollock's army marched from Jelalabad on the way to Cabul, and the hearts of ten thousand fighting-men beat high with hope at the thought of taking a stern revenge for the assassination of their fellow-countrymen.

At Futtiabad a week's halt was made for the purpose of collecting sufficient food, since it was unwise to rely upon obtaining provisions during the march.

A few Afghans showed themselves on the distant hills, but they made no attempt to molest us, being doubtless engaged simply in picking up information.

Now, on the first night that we halted, it occurred to me that here was a propitious occasion for prosecuting my search, and I broached the idea to Saunders, who was sitting with me, idly smoking.

"The risk will be very small," I observed, "since all the fighting-men are absent."

"But what is it you propose to do?"

"Dress myself as a native, and seek information in the

villages; it may chance that Sara has been shut up in one of the neighbouring forts."

The surgeon shook his head in dissent.

"It is, of course, just possible that your view may be correct, though I doubt it. If Miss Gurdon be alive, she has been sent further into country."

"Still there can be no harm in trying to ascertain the fact."

"Oh," he exclaimed testily, "if you are so tired of life, have your own way."

"Then while I change will you get me a permit to leave the camp? at least, I have no fervid desire to be shot down by our men."

Emptying the ashes from his pipe, he walked away muttering, and I just caught the expression, "Childish folly and impatience!" But in spite of his dislike to the scheme, I knew he would not fail me.

The captain and Brader were on duty, for which I was extremely thankful, as they would have supported Saunders in his opposition, and it was not my intention to yield.

On his return, the surgeon surveyed my disguise with a glance of cold approval.

"Will it do?" I asked laughingly.

"The dress is all right: but what of the story? how do you account for yourself?"

"In this way. During the massacres, our old friend Umran Khan captured the daughter of a British officer. Desirous, for private reasons, of separating her from

Akbar's captives, he sent her under a small escort to his fort. Since that time he has heard nothing either of escort or prisoner, and has sent me to look for them."

"Fairly plausible; but there is one weak point. Suppose Umran has returned?"

"That would prove awkward, but there is little fear of it; he will not leave Akbar until the war is finished. But come; time presses, and I would be off."

Saunders went with me to the confines of the camp, and there we bade each other farewell.

"Do not be downcast," I exclaimed lightly; "you will see me back in the course of a day or two."

Without any particular design, I had, by frequent conversations with some of the jezailchees attached to the British force, made myself fairly well acquainted with the topography of the surrounding district, and now found this knowledge of considerable use.

The night was as yet dark, but in an hour or two the moon would rise, and meanwhile my route lay along the highroad, such as it was, which we had that day traversed.

The prospect of adventure had already raised my spirits, and I walked on light-heartedly, being cheered by the notion that I was doing something, however vague, in Sara's service.

Some distance along on the left hand was a narrow but perfectly safe path, which the jezailchees had assured me led to a small village.

Leaving the main road, and placing my pistols well

within reach of my hand, I stepped on the path, and at the same moment the moon burst through a fringe of black cloud, lighting up the desolate scene.

"A good omen!" I muttered, and with a glance around at the fantastic shadows thrown by the projecting rocks, moved briskly forward.

As it was no part of my plan to avoid observation, I made no attempt at concealment, but walked boldly in the full light of the moon.

Still my senses were not closed to the dangers which might, and probably did, lurk amongst these barren hills, and before half a mile had been traversed, I stood face to face with the first peril in this new enterprise.

An abrupt turn of the path brought me in front of a big boulder, over the flat top of which hung out, white and shining in the moonlight, three rifle barrels.

It was a critical moment; everything depended upon my self-possession. Were I to betray the slightest sign of fear or hesitation, that instant would be my last; my corpse would fall, riddled with bullets, to the ground.

All was strangely still; there came no sound borne on the night air, no movement of living beings. But I knew well that behind the shelter of the rock crouched three swarthy hill-men.

I spoke aloud, and without visible effort.

"Allah's children guard their land well," I said; "but wolves do not eat wolves, neither do the Khyberees turn their guns against the friend of their chiefs. I am the sworn helper of Umran Khan."

I contrived of set purpose to deliver my speech with the accent of the tribes living to the north of Cabul, in order that the conversation might not be too free.

An animated discussion went on behind the rock, and I caught the phrases, "He is but one." "Umran Khan's friend." "We may get news of the Feringhee camp."

This last idea appeared to decide the matter, for four men crept from their hiding-place—three carrying rifles, and the other, an older man, armed only with a long knife at the end of a pole.

I advanced to meet them, craving shelter for the night, saying that I carried a message from Umran Khan to the headman of the village.

"Hast thou passed by the Feringhee camp?" one asked.

"I have. But it is well not to approach too closely; the Feringhees sleep with one eye open; a bullet whistled past my ear in the darkness."

"But there are camels and bullocks, and the moon will fail shortly."

"True, the animals are without number, like blades of grass in the fertile valley washed by the murmuring stream; yet are they strictly guarded."

"Is the road clear where the mouth of the pass opens?"

"From the Feringhee camp have I met no man until now."

They talked together for a few minutes in fierce whispers, and then the one with the pole, which I noticed he carried in his left hand, said,—

“Friend, I am the headman of yonder village, whither I will lead thee, that thou mayest rest in peace. Follow me.”

“And thy companions?” I asked; but they had already rounded the bend in the path, and were speeding swiftly towards the main road, bent, I did not doubt, upon plunder.

On the way to the village I told the old man the tale which I had invented, and was gratified at perceiving that he had no suspicion of its falseness, asking only one simple question, which was easily parried.

“Why did not the khan come in person?” he queried.

“Because he is at Akbar’s right hand. He will return no more until this fresh host of Feringhees shares the fate of the first.”

The Afghan smiled maliciously, and his eyes were filled with hatred.

“Allah has been good to us,” he muttered, “and His children are grateful.”

“But what of this young damsel? know ye aught concerning her?”

“From the lips of the young and witless words run like water from the mountain side, but to the aged is given wisdom; I speak not in haste.”

In this statement he obviously made no error, since for the space of half an hour he kept his lips tightly shut, while I walked by his side in an agony of suspense.

At the end of that time he said, thoughtfully and as if weighing his words,—

“Between Hamu, the head of my tribe, and Umran there is peace; therefore it is lawful that my lips should be opened. A few days after the last of the infidel warriors lay dead on this side of the Soorkhab River, a daughter of the Feringhees fell into our hands. We found her alone in a gorge to the westward of our village. She talked wildly, stretching out her arms riverward; but we understood not her story. Many nights the moon rose over our village while the maiden lay in my hut awaiting the summons of Allah. But her time had not yet come; and when she grew stronger, we carried her to Hamu’s fort, which lies a day’s journey off.”

“Then truly has Allah dealt kindly with me,” I cried. “Now, after beholding the maiden, can I return with a joyful heart.”

“Again thou speakest without due heed, but that is a fault of thy youth; I perceive that as yet thy years have been few in number. The daughter of the Feringhees abides with us no longer.”

I stopped abruptly, and my fingers itched to clutch the old man by the throat.

Fortunately he misconstrued the cause of my agitation, and betrayed no sign of anger.

“Umran will wax wroth,” I said, “when he learns how success has at the last moment slipped through my fingers.”

Then as a new and terrible fancy leaped into my brain, I shrieked rather than cried,—

“Speak; is it that the maiden is dead?”

"Methinks," said the old man dryly, "that thou takest thy friend Umran's affairs much to heart, and yet art not of his blood."

"In a sense thou speakest truly; nevertheless, under Allah, Umran has given me my blood. Even a young warrior doth not forget the hand of the chief who hath saved his life."

"Umran is brave and generous; the lion is not more bold, neither lives there a woman more tender; therefore we will work him no wrong. I have said that the maiden is no longer in our midst; but harm has not come to her. When the Feringhees burned the villages of the Shin-warries, and brought their forts to the ground, Hamu bore his fair captive into the mountains to keep her in safety until the end of the fighting."

That he spoke the truth I did not doubt, more especially as his story tallied so remarkably with our own surmises.

Nor did any difficulty present itself with respect to the identification of Hamu's prisoner. I felt that she could be none other than Sara, but in order to make assurance doubly sure, I questioned the villager closely on the point.

His answers satisfied me in every particular, leaving, as they did, not a shadow of doubt that Sara was still alive and safe from harm.

Ere the village was reached the moon failed, and we entered the place in darkness. The building which my guide approached was a wretched flat-roofed hovel, with mud-built walls, and two rooms either of which would compare unfavourably with an English stable.

There seemed to be no furniture beyond a primitive bedstead, which was unoccupied, and an earthen jar or two filled with grain. In one corner a bullock was fastened, and in another an animal whose species was palpably patent when it lifted up its voice in song.

The headman lit a torch stuck in the wall, and pointed to the bed.

"Sleep in peace," he said, "nor fear harm ; I will return ere dawn."

I have written that the bed was vacant ; but that was not strictly true, since I had no lack of company, and the other occupants paid such devoted and unremitting attention to my person, that sleep, even had I wished it, would have been out of the question.

But I was quite fresh, and spent the few hours before the dawn in thinking out how to get away from the village without exciting distrust.

At the first streak of light my host came in, and with a patriarchal salute informed me that his three friends had returned, having been unsuccessful in their raid.

"The Feringhees are cunning as serpents," I replied ; "yet are they not clever enough for me. I will venture into their camp in broad day, that my eyes may spy out their strength and weakness."

The Afghan gazed at me admiringly.

"How ?" he asked.

"As a cossid whose dispatches have been stolen in the Khyber."

"Be careful that thy life payeth not forfeit for thy

rashness. Yet wert thou successful the information would be of exceeding value."

"Fear nothing," I said; "only, I pray thee, delay not the moment of my departure."

He brought water for my ablutions, and then turned away busying himself in cooking a dish of rice and ghee of which I partook.

After this he led me to the path through the still sleeping village, and I took an ashurpee or gold mohur, worth about thirty shillings, from my pocket.

"As thou hast observed, Behram Khan is young," I remarked, "yet nevertheless his heart is grateful; and if Umran regain possession of the Feringhee maiden, rest assured that thy service will not be forgotten."

His eyes sparkled at the glitter of gold, and making a low salaam, he pocketed the coin greedily, darting a swift glance around to make sure that none of his neighbours were in sight; then with a further farewell we parted.

The day was still young, the path deserted, and I walked on, humming merrily to myself.

What news, what glorious news to pour into Captain Gurdon's ear! Sara alive! Sara safe from harm, awaiting only our coming to set her free! The more I pondered the matter, the more certain it became that we should yet see her, that she would ere long be restored to her father's arms.

I took no notice of the distance, and approached the outskirts of the camp in entire forgetfulness of my disguised appearance.

A sharp command to halt, and the click of a rifle, aided me to recollect, and throwing up my hands I cried,—

“Do not shoot; it is all right. Pass the word for your officer;” for noticing that the sentinel belonged to the 13th, I hoped one of my friends might be on duty.

In this I was not disappointed: Brader came up a few minutes later, scarcely able to believe in the truth of my return unharmed.

“It is Paul!” he exclaimed in surprise; “yet truly

‘Thou com’st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.’”

“Where is the captain?” I cried; “I have joyful news for him.”

“‘Still harping on my daughter.’”

“Sara is alive, and though a captive, in no danger.”

The young soldier gripped my hand.

“That is news indeed, Paul! it will put new blood into the captain’s veins. Hasten; I would not have you delay an instant, as, to speak truth, I believe he has lost all hope.”

If, as is sometimes affirmed, joy ever kills, I think Captain Gurdon would have died that morning. He was standing outside his tent with Saunders, and gazed at me eagerly as I drew near.

“Is it Paul?” he said, questioningly.

“Yes, sir; my errand is accomplished, and this time I bear good news. I have gained tidings of Sara, who is alive, and in the hands of an Afghan chief named Hamu.”

"Are you sure, boy?" he asked earnestly; "do not raise false hopes in my breast."

"There cannot be a doubt, sir; it has happened exactly as we thought," and I repeated, word for word, the villager's conversation.

"God bless you, my boy, for this assurance," he said gratefully; "I know not how to thank you properly for this service."

"I desire no thanks, sir; the knowledge that I have been of use is ample payment."

Saunders shook me by the hand.

"Come and put those heathen garments away," he said significantly; and judging that the captain would prefer to be alone, I followed the surgeon.

From that day I noticed with delight that Captain Gurdon grew steadily more cheerful; hope had revived in his breast, and he looked forward with renewed confidence to a meeting with his daughter.

From Futtiabad we marched to Gundamuk in two divisions, the rear being under the command of General M'Caskill.

We were now close to the spot where the final act in the tragedy had been played, and I resolved to visit the hill on which the last of my gallant comrades had fallen.

As it happened, the column was halted for a considerable time, some guns having stuck fast in the narrow path, and Brader and I set off together.

The hill on this side was difficult of ascent, but we

pushed on to the top, where a mournful spectacle met our gaze.

The ground was thickly strewn with lifeless bodies, in some places three or four lying together. Above our heads, the foul birds of prey, disturbed at their horrid meal, wheeled lazily, as if gorged with the banquet.

A few of the dead I could still recognize, and amongst them the chivalrous Mahoney. His face was black, and the eyes were pecked out, but I knew it was the lion-hearted sergeant. Bending over, I saw that his body was literally riddled with bullets, and I turned away with a deep sigh. He, too, had done his duty.

"Let us go, Paul," Brader whispered; "this is horrible."

"Yet much worse remains. But come; the march has recommenced."

That same afternoon we reached the Soorkhab River, where the tents were pitched, and early on the following morning we started towards Jugdulluk.

The march this day reminded me forcibly of the journey down. The Ghilzais lining the hills poured in volley after volley, doing terrible execution, while they, for the most part, remained hidden or out of range.

In the pass itself, the bodies of those who had fallen during the retreat lay choking the path to such a degree that we were obliged to tread upon the putrid flesh.

The soldiers gripped their weapons tightly, and their eyes flashed with fierce determination as they breathed a vow of vengeance; but the Afghans afforded them no opportunity of gratifying their desire.

The next day we passed the barricade which had cost so many lives, and I pointed out to the captain the place where Sara and I, assisted by Mahoney, had forced a way through.

The slain still lay where they had fallen, cut and mutilated in a savage manner, and again an angry cry went up from the horrified soldiers.

As we turned sorrowfully away, the captain said, brokenly,—

“I begin now to understand what you must have endured, and how impossible it is that I shall ever be able to pay the debt I owe you. To think of my darling child having lived through this!”

Other dreadful sights, too, we saw as the march proceeded: in one place, nearly a thousand sepoy and camp-followers, huddled together, stripped of their clothing by the inhuman foe, frozen to death by the bitter cold.

At length we arrived in the valley of Tezeen, where we halted to allow of the rear-guard coming up. The second division had suffered much more than we had done; they had lost heavily in men and baggage-animals, whilst the survivors were so fatigued that it was judged inexpedient to proceed further without resting.

“What astonishes me,” remarked Brader, as we sat chatting for a few minutes after supper, “is that Akbar should have let us thread the Jugdulluk Pass without an attack in force. Thus far there has been no real effort to oppose our progress.”

“There still remains the Khoord Cabul Pass, which can

be made wellnigh impregnable," I observed. "My opinion is that the decisive battle will be fought there."

"Those who live will see," interposed the Scotchman sagely; "one can never count on what these mad-brained enthusiasts may or may not do. But our duty at present is to sleep while we have the chance;" and with a general good-night the group broke up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

REUNION.

THE next day the Afghans amused themselves by keeping up a somewhat desultory fire, which did comparatively little damage ; but towards night the attacks increased in force, and soon every picket was engaged with the foe.

Even for us in camp there was no rest ; the noise of the firing and the shouts of the men kept every one well awake.

A little after midnight, too, all the troops were aroused to repel a chupao, which the Afghans carried out with great skill and daring, even penetrating some distance within our lines.

Hurrying from my tent I sought the captain, and after the attack had been repulsed, remained with him until the morning, watching the illumination of the hill-sides, caused by the flashes of the muskets.

It was patent that the Afghans were present in large numbers. From every height, except those actually held by our men, came an incessant blaze of fire, and a rain of bullets swept over the tents.

Towards morning, however, the fire slackened ; and when

the night-clouds lifted, the enemy swiftly and silently decamped.

"We shall have warm work in the Tezeen Pass," observed Captain Gurdon as we moved away. "Akbar will not be able to hold his men in play much longer."

With this forecast my personal opinion did not coincide.

"Sooner or later the fight must come, and for our purpose the sooner the better," I said; "but were I Akbar, I would reserve the final effort for the Khoord Cabul."

At first it seemed as if the captain's calculations were wrong. Slowly the huge and unwieldy procession wound its way along the narrow paths, edged by deep precipitous chasms, until fully two miles of the tortuous defile had been traversed.

Up to this point the enemy had not showed himself. Nothing was heard save the noise made by the tramp of our men, the shouts of the drivers, the panting of the animals, and the creaking of the carts.

"It is to be the Khoord Cabul after all," I said, when, as if in derision, the hills on either side burst into a sheet of living flame.

The bullets rattled about us like hailstones, and many of the men fell dead or wounded, but there was nothing in the nature of panic. Soon the word came for the 13th to scale the heights on the right, while another body was ordered to dislodge the enemy from the opposite range.

Up we went with a will, scrambling, leaping, standing at times where there was scarcely a vestige of foothold, while all the time the Afghans kept steadily firing.

I glanced at our men; they were breathing hard, but their eyes shone with a fierce light, and their faces wore an air of stern determination. They had not forgotten the sights by the road-side, and now at last had come a chance of revenge.

Higher and higher we climbed, Captain Gurdon leading, until the ridge was gained. Halting for a moment, the men fixed bayonets, and then with a loud cheer we rushed at the Afghans, who stood waiting to receive us.

After the one stern "Hurrah," there was no further shouting; but the swords of the officers flashed, and the bayonets were pushed home.

A tall, swarthy native with an evil scowl on his face stood in the forefront of his men, waving a red standard and chanting his war-cry.

Brader and I rushed at him together, each eager to gain possession of the flag; but in the short spin the lieutenant proved the speedier.

Parrying a fierce sweep of the Afghan's tulwar, he cut the man down with a lightning-like blow, and grasped the falling colour.

Even in the stress of battle he could not conquer his *penchant* for quotations, exclaiming as the Afghan fell, "'Now, infidel, I have thee on the hip,' or rather shoulder. Never mind; we will let it pass."

Then tearing the piece of silk from the pole, he ran on where the fight waged thickest.

The struggle was not of long duration. The Afghans could not stand the taste of cold steel, and before long the

survivors turned and fled incontinently, followed by the gallant 13th.

We chased them down one hill and up another, slaying and sparing not, until Captain Gurdon gave the signal of recall.

Now it happened that the heights which we had captured were commanded by still higher elevations, from which the Afghans poured into our ranks a murderous fire.

We could not get at them, and the position was fast becoming extremely critical, when an order to lie down was signalled to us from the valley.

Then the gunners opened fire from the howitzers, and very soon the shells went screaming over our heads, and burst amidst the crowded masses above us.

Everywhere the battle raged furiously, and individual deeds of daring were numerous as the sands on the seashore. Officers and men, British and sepoy, were all alike animated by a burning, unconquerable desire for vengeance.

Prodigies of valour were achieved. The little Goorkhas, than whom there are no braver soldiers, scrambling like cats from rock to rock, met the Afghans here, there, and everywhere, pushing them back, toppling them over precipices, slaying with unwearied arm.

The horsemen, too, safely traversing paths fittest for mountain goats, hurled themselves with irresistible violence upon the Afghan cavalry, and broke them utterly.

On all sides the tide of success ran strongly, until at

length the Afghans, dispirited by their losses, gave way, disappearing over the hills and leaving the passage free.

We had not suffered greatly in the action, and the fight had done the men good.

Presently we reached the short but narrow defile known as the Tinghee Tarekee, and here we encountered another horrible spectacle. The path was choked with a mass of putrid flesh, which gave forth a most nauseating stench.

"This is the spot where so many of the hapless camp-followers met their doom," I said to the captain. "Sara and I had got through when the firing began in earnest."

The captain shuddered.

"It must have been simply awful," he answered. "Come, let us get away."

"Where do we halt?" asked Brader; "this tramping is tiring work."

"In the Khoord Cabul valley, about a mile this side of the pass. But do not be too sanguine; there will be plenty of outpost duty."

The lieutenant groaned. "'Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?'" he asked, with a comical gesture.

"Represented by a flat rock, with the sky for pillow!"

"Weariness

Can snore upon the flint, when restive sloth
Finds the down pillow hard."

"Aptly quoted; but I fancy we shall see little of down pillows yet awhile. Have you forgotten that after reaching Cabul we have still to return through these passes?"

Once more Brader groaned.

“If ever we get back to India, I shall make my *debut* as an author by publishing a guide-book to Afghanistan,” he said.

“With a list of the most comfortable hotels,” added the captain mischievously.

“And appropriate texts from Shakespeare, with accompanying pen-and-ink sketches by the author.”

“Capital,” he exclaimed, laughing gaily. “I declare, gentlemen, these ideas do you credit.”

“Think it over to-night; the subject will serve to occupy your mind while you are on picket.”

In this the captain did but jest; yet nevertheless it did most strangely happen that Brader had to take his share of this unpleasant duty.

“‘Oh, my prophetic soul, my uncle!’” cried that young man lugubriously; adding with mock solemnity,—

“‘’Tis now the very witching hour of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to the world.’”

Paul, my friend, can I not coax you into sharing my lonely vigil? Think of the honour; you will be one of the eyes of this vast host.”

“There is the one opportunity of a lifetime, Paul,” laughed Captain Gurdon; “embrace the offer while it remains open.”

Not feeling particularly sleepy, I consented to accompany the lieutenant, and together we set out with his men in the direction of the pass.

We had no time for supper, but the captain promised

that food should be sent out both for ourselves and the men.

Having posted the sentries and given them their final instructions, Brader returned to the flat rock on which I had sat down.

"Can you keep awake?" he asked. "My eyes are heavy as lead; I could fall asleep in an instant."

"Is any danger apprehended?"

"None; in fact some documents which have been intercepted show that Akbar's power has been broken. It is confidently expected that several of the chiefs will come in during the night."

We sat chatting until the arrival of the promised food, when Brader once more bestirred himself.

"One of the most comfortable and elegant hotels is that of the Khoord Cabul," I affected to read from an imaginary book. "The building is constructed on a colossal scale, and is replete with every accommodation. Most especially is the *cuisine* worthy of all praise. The viands comprise every delicacy, and are cooked in the inimitable style of—"

"Now, Paul, be still. Look at this offal, and tell me what it is intended to represent."

"That is lamb," I answered emphatically, "*early* lamb; bred amidst the flowery meads of Afghanistan; cooked in the inimitable style of—"

But I was not allowed to finish the sentence.

"Leave that for my guide-book," he interrupted; "there your magniloquence will prove invaluable. Meanwhile, let

us concentrate our attention upon this piece of aged gun-bullock. Are your teeth strong?"

"As iron; and my knife is sharp."

"You have much for which to feel grateful," he observed gloomily; "my teeth will break like glass."

"Note for the guide-book: 'It will be advisable for intending travellers to provide themselves beforehand with a spare set of strong, useful teeth.' How will that read?"

"I have no time now to bother with conundrums; I fear that our plight is even worse than I had reckoned on. They must have roasted a piece of the gun-carriage instead of the bullock."

The supper truly was not a triumph of the gastronomic art; but hunger is a keen sharpener of the appetite, and we fell to with a will upon the charred mass.

"There is at least one comfort to be derived from such a meal," Brader remarked philosophically, as he dispatched the last mouthful: "the pangs of indigestion will not permit of our sleeping; I can easily trust myself to keep awake now."

I was still laughing at this odd notion of comfort when our attention was drawn to the nearest sentry, who seemed to be parleying with a stranger.

We had already passed on several of our late opponents to the camp, and concluding that this was another of the "peace-makers," as the lieutenant jokingly called them, we walked leisurely towards him.

"After a full meal, gentle exercise is beneficial: but gentle, mark you, not violent—not mountain-climbing, for

instance.—Well, Stevens,” to the sentry, “does not this gentleman make himself intelligible? How strange it is that these people will not learn to speak English!”

The soldier grinned.

“I can’t make nowt out of this ’ere ’eathen, sir; he weant say nowt but ‘Captain Gurdon.’”

“How touching!” exclaimed the lieutenant; “it reminds me of the story of that beautiful Eastern lady who travelled over Europe in bygone ages, uttering the mystic names, ‘Gilbert,’ ‘London.’ But what connection can there be between our visitor and the captain? By Jove, it may be the ogre Haman who carried off the charming princess. Here, Paul, is a chance of distinguishing yourself; have at him in his own savage tongue.”

Meanwhile I had been peering closely at the Afghan, and perceived that he was not Hamu, whose name the lieutenant had mispronounced, but none other than my old helper Umran.

There was little of the suppliant in his demeanour. Bold and erect he stood; his blue eyes were flashing fearlessly, and his speech was calmly confident.

“There is a Feringhee chief named Gurdon,” he began; “it is my desire to be led into his presence.”

“Captain Gurdon is not a great chief,” I replied; “if you wish to tender your submission, you must go before the general.”

The fiery hill-man toyed with his sword menacingly, and the blue eyes gleamed with passion.

“You mistake,” he said haughtily, and trying to stifle

his wrath: "when Umran Khan sues to the hated Feringhees for peace, then indeed will Allah have forsaken him utterly."

"There breathes the true spirit of the Khyberee!" I cried. "Umran, has not your heart had its fill of blood?"

I spoke naturally now, and the Afghan looked with eager scrutiny into my face.

"Is it Clevely Sahib?" he asked; "or has Allah permitted his spirit to return from the other world?"

"I am no spirit, Umran, though, through the treachery of your countrymen, I was nearly made one."

Ignoring the latter portion of this speech, he cried with genuine earnestness,—

"I rejoice that Allah has preserved your life; for months my heart has sorrowed over your supposed death."

"Well, I must say that the Ghilzais tried their very hardest to make the supposition a correct one. But what is your business with Captain Gurdon?"

"Since you live, the other sahib need not be troubled. Where are the ladies with whom you travelled?"

"One is dead of cold," I answered bitterly; "the younger one is in the hands of Hamu Khan," and I briefly related what had happened.

"The first is the will of Allah," he observed solemnly; "against His decree no man dare utter aught. But in the case of the maiden there is still hope, nay certainty, that she will be restored to her friends."

"Will you use your influence with this Hamu?" I asked; "because if so, my fears are at an end."

"There is no need; the maiden is already under my care. Listen," he added hurriedly: "what I have done has been out of no love for the Feringhee chief, but for your sake alone. Him, and every other invader of our country save yourself, would I willingly slay, but because of my affection for you I have done him this service."

"Where is his daughter?"

"In a place of safety, from whence I will bring her if your troops ever reach Cabul."

I could scarcely refrain from smiling at this covert threat, knowing how utterly the Afghan power was broken.

"Let me fetch Gurdon Sahib," I urged, "that he may thank you in person for your generosity." But to my appeal this remarkable man remained obstinately deaf.

"There are no thanks due from the Feringhee chief to me," he said; "rather let him thank Allah, who made you his friend. And now farewell; when the time comes I will see you again."

I bade him farewell, and with a graceful salaam he turned and walked slowly away.

"There goes a bundle of contradictions," I observed to Brader: "that is my old friend Umran."

"What did he want with the captain?"

"To tell him of Sara's safety. He has taken her under his protection;" and I repeated the conversation which had just terminated.

"An odd customer," my companion remarked; "but I can partly understand his sentiments. If you remember,

several of the chiefs at Cabul spoke in similar terms. Their objection is not to us individually, but to the race."

"And that only because they view us in the light of unjust invaders."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully: "if we were Afghans, perhaps we should see matters differently."

Anxious to acquaint Captain Gurdon with this fresh information, I returned to camp, and gave him the particulars of Umran's visit.

"When we reach Cabul!" he cried joyfully; "then it will not be long before I see my darling child again."

"Then you do not think it likely that there will be a fresh attack in the Khoord Cabul?"

"Not at all; there will be no further fighting—the Afghans are cowed for the moment. No, my boy; two marches more will bring us within sight of Cabul."

He smiled pleasantly, and it rejoiced me to behold him in such high spirits.

In the Khoord Cabul we found numerous evidences of Akbar's original intention to deliver his blow in this almost impregnable position, and we learned afterwards that he had only abandoned it in deference to the judgment of his chiefs, who preferred attacking us in the Tezeen valley, with the disastrous results already chronicled.

Barriades composed of huge blocks of stone had been built across the paths, and the heights, nearly inaccessible by nature, had been covered with tier above tier of sun-gahs or stone breastworks.

But no sharp-shooters ready to hurl death into our

midst lay behind those walls; as the captain had predicted, all opposition was at an end.

The black cloud which for a time dimmed the lustre of the British arms had lifted; once again had British valour and pluck asserted its pre-eminence.

Well was it for the Afghans that they sued for peace. As we marched through the terrible pass, the bodies of those who had fallen in the ever-memorable retreat confronted us at every turn, exciting in the breasts of our men not sorrow alone, but a fierce indignation.

But Akbar's power had waned, and his huge host was dispersed. After threading the pass we marched without molestation to Boothak, where a halt was called.

Poor Captain Gurdon! my heart bled for him as we reached the camping-ground, where in some undiscoverable spot reposed the bones of his dead wife.

He did not speak of his lost loved one, but the pressure of his hand when he bade me good-night was more eloquent by far than words.

The next day we advanced to within three miles of Cabul, and a strong detachment composed of men from various regiments took possession of the Bala Hissar, and once again the British flag floated proudly above the walls of the Afghan stronghold.

Now that the time was so near for the promised restoration of his daughter, the captain could not control his impatience. Every moment that could be spared from duty was spent in scanning the adjoining hills.

As the day wore on his agitation visibly increased, and

a hundred times he asked me if it were possible that Umran had deceived him.

In vain I sought to soothe him, to calm his fears, by expressing my unbounded confidence in the honour of the Afghan chief.

"Sara is safe," I urged—"her coming is but a question of a few hours; before night even she may be in your arms."

Personally I had the fullest confidence that Umran would fulfil his promise, and the result proved that my trust was not misplaced.

Towards the close of the afternoon the captain and I were standing on the outskirts of the camp, when a small body of horsemen appeared on the plain north of Cabul.

I glanced at my companion, whose eyes were fixed intently on the little cavalcade.

"They are coming this way, Paul," he cried. "Look, boy, at the foremost horseman and tell me if it is Umran Khan; my eyes are dim."

"You are not deceived," I answered joyously; "it is the Khyberree chief himself."

"But Sara! where is Sara? I cannot see her."

"Patience!" I said. "In a few minutes she will be with you; doubtless Umran has placed her in the midst for safety. Do you not perceive that his men form a compact square?"

Soon all suspense was at an end. The horsemen opened their ranks, and four bearers carrying a nalkee came towards us. In front of them rode Umran, who called me by name.

"I have brought the daughter of the sahib," he said, and with a movement of the hand he directed the attendants to set down their burden.

Opening the folding-doors I helped Sara out and placed her in her father's arms. Then feeling that such a reunion should be held sacred, I turned to the Afghan, who had meantime sent the bearers back.

"Farewell, Clevely Sahib," he said, with a little touch of pathos; "we shall meet no more. I go to rejoin Mohanmed's son. May Allah protect you."

"And you also!" I cried fervently; "the memory of your kindness to me will dwell in my heart for all time."

Once again he bade me farewell, and turning his horse's head, rode slowly back to his followers.

For some time I stood gazing after the receding horsemen, and dwelling upon the peculiarities of their extraordinary leader, when my arm was touched gently, and turning I beheld Sara.

Her eyes were filled with happy tears, and as she raised her face to mine I kissed her cheeks.

"Thank God for His great goodness," I said earnestly; and the captain, who was standing by his daughter's side, responded with a fervent "Amen."

We walked back towards the tent, and the men of the 13th came running up with hearty cheers for her whom they had long since regarded as dead.

Brader was in the Bala Hissar, but the surgeon joined us, and for hours we sat listening to Sara's account of her adventures.



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I helped Sara out, and placed her in her father's arms (p. 401)

“The jewels are quite safe, Paul,” she said in conclusion. “I have kept them hidden in my hair; to-morrow you shall have them. But now you must tell me all that has happened since I saw you last.”

Thus we remained talking, and reveille found us still together, for the excitement of happiness had chased away all feelings of fatigue.

With the new day, however, the captain was compelled to resume his duties, and so our little party reluctantly broke up.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

THE two weeks succeeding Sara's return were passed in comparative quiet and inactivity, the only events worthy of chronicling being the arrival of General Nott from Candahar, the restoration of the British prisoners, and the destruction of Istaliff, a beautiful town lying to the north of Cabul.

Then the ardently-wished-for orders were issued for the dismantling of the Afghan capital.

On each succeeding morning strong detachments left the camp, with the object of blowing up the chief markets and bazaars and setting fire to the houses.

Day and night the red flare from the burning buildings lit up the surrounding scenery, until nothing of the proud city remained but the Kuzilbash quarter and the Bala Hissar. Pollock the Avenger had in good sooth "set a mark" which the Afghans were not likely soon to forget.

The weather was now becoming piercingly cold; the summits of the higher hills were already coated with white patches; heavy clouds obscured the sky, heralding the approach of winter.

With the recollection of that other terrible march through the passes fresh in my mind, I began to grow impatient of delay, and hailed with delight the signal for the homeward journey.

Once again we set forth, but on this occasion with every hope of reaching our destination in safety.

It would be as tiresome as unnecessary to describe in detail the events of that march, more especially as no untoward accident happened to any member of our particular party.

Captain Gurdon and Brader being attached to Sir Robert Sale's command, had plenty of fighting, as the Afghans had not yet done with us. But though the hill-men fought as desperately as ever, the sting was taken out of their attack, and at no time did they succeed in making our position serious.

We halted at Jugdulluk and destroyed the town, scarcely one stone being left upon another.

On the morning of the first of November 1842, we bade adieu to the Khyber Pass, and after a somewhat roundabout route encamped four miles from Peshawur.

Hearing that General Avitabili still commanded in that town, I determined to pay him a visit; and leaving Sara in her father's care, I set out.

The Italian officer did not at first recognize me, but at the mention of my name his face lit up with a genial smile, and he shook me cordially by the hand.

"Paul Clevely, alive and well!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "You have been fortunate, my friend; I counted

you amongst the dead long ago. But your father ! is he not with you ? ”

I shook my head, saying mournfully,—

“ Alas, sir ! in my father’s case your forecast proved correct ; he did not live to reach Cabul.”

The general laid a hand upon my shoulder, remarking kindly,—

“ Poor boy ! the subject is a painful one.”

“ It is indeed,” I answered ; “ nevertheless, if you can spare the time, I would like roughly to sketch what has passed since I last saw you.”

He bade me be seated, and listened attentively to the story of my adventures, interrupting only occasionally by an exclamation of pity or amazement.

“ You have in truth suffered much,” he said when I had concluded ; “ and now what do you purpose doing ? ”

“ That is a matter concerning which I seek your advice. My father, as you are aware, possessed considerable wealth at Lahore. Is it likely that the present ruler of the Punjab would recognize my claim to it ? ”

“ Not in the least. By this time your father’s property has been distributed amongst a host of hungry courtiers, who will stick to it like leeches. No, my young friend ; be guided by my advice, and give up any idea of returning to the Punjab. A stab in the back is all that you are likely to get at Lahore.”

“ Thank you,” I said ; “ I will follow your counsel,” and rising bade him farewell, resisting his entreaties to remain for the night.

Next morning I confided the result of my visit to Captain Gurdon, who entirely acquiesced in the Italian's views.

"It is hard upon you, Paul," he remarked; "but there can be no doubt that Avitabili is right: it would be a tempting of fate to venture into Lahore. Fortunately there is no need for despondency. With your linguistic abilities there is no reason why you should not make your way in the world. I will speak to Sir Robert, and I have no doubt that the Indian Government will gladly find you a good post. Besides," he added with a smile, "you forget the rubies; the sale of those will realize a moderate fortune."

"Unless some one turns up to claim them."

"There is little fear of that. I have instituted searching inquiries without result, and am certain that they belong to none of our people. They were most likely the property of some Afghan chief."

"Even so they are not mine; Sara has an equal right to them with myself."

"That matter must be settled between yourselves," he remarked smilingly; "and here is her ladyship.—How is my little girl after her night's rest?"

"Quite well, papa, only desperately impatient to be moving. "Do we not break up the camp to-day?"

"I am afraid not; the general must have time to complete his arrangements, you know."

"I suppose so," she answered resignedly; "but I do long to get out of this horrid country. I think I shall dream of Afghanistan all the days of my life."

The captain made no reply, but his face grew sad; Sara's words had brought to his mind the recollection of that trampled grave at Boothak.

Anxious to break the awkward pause, I said,—

“You must curb your impatience for a day or two at least, perhaps even longer; an army does not move with the celerity of an individual.”

The halt, which extended to the twelfth of November, was of great benefit to the men, many of whom were in a state of collapse owing to sickness and privation.

On the morning of November 12 we marched out from the camp near Peshawur, and pushing on rapidly reached Ferozepore on the nineteenth of December, having crossed the Sutlej by a bridge of boats surmounted by a triumphal arch, which the governor-general had caused to be erected in honour of the victorious troops.

At Ferozepore we met with the utmost kindness and sympathy, the time being passed in a continual round of breakfasts, balls, and dinner-parties given by the governor-general and the officers of various regiments, who vied with each other in a lavish hospitality.

One morning, about a week after our arrival, Lieutenant Brader came to my tent, flourishing an open letter in his hand. His features told me that something of importance had happened, and I waited with curiosity for him to speak.

“Paul!” he exclaimed by way of greeting, “have you ever noticed with what marvellous accuracy the immortal bard has depicted every conceivable event in the history of

one's life? Here, for instance, is a striking illustration. Listen."

"Oh come, my dear fellow, no Shakespeare this morning," I protested mildly; "my head still aches from the effects of last night's ball."

"There," he cried exultingly, "is a splendid example of your own selection. What saith the poet on that very subject?—

'For in my youth I never did apply
Hot and rebellious liquors to my blood.'

Again,—

'O that men should put an enemy
In their mouths to steal away their brains.'

Or from the same scene,—

'Every inordinate cup is unblessed,
And the ingredient is a devil.'

"Do not trouble further about me," I meekly suggested; "let us attend to your particular case. I have promised to take Miss Gurdon for a canter."

Waving the letter above his head, and planting himself firmly on the ground, he proceeded to recite in a melodramatic manner,—

"'Oh, now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
That make ambition virtue! Oh, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.'"

“And pray what does all that mean when put into every-day English?”

“Turn to ‘Twelfth Night,’ Act ii., Scene 5, what have we there?—

‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness,
And some have greatness thrust upon them.’

In this last category am I placed.”

“Ah! now I begin to understand,” I said banteringly: “they have superseded Lord Ellenborough and appointed you governor-general in his stead. Allow me to offer you my most sincere congratulations.”

“Therein thou errest,” he answered; “I speak of quite another matter. I am summoned to England. My cousin and my cousin’s son are dead, and I am Baron Weston, a pillar of the state.”

This was a very interesting piece of information, and I congratulated my Shakespeare-loving friend in all sincerity.

Sara was delighted when I introduced the lieutenant in his new rôle of “pillar of the state,” and clapped her hands in high glee.

“It is charming,” she declared; “quite a romance in real life. I trust your lordship will deign to remember me when I return to England.”

“Miss Gurdon,” he replied, “I can truly say with Julius Cæsar,—

‘But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.’”

“Bravo, my Lord Weston,” cried the captain, who had just entered; “but I fear we shall have small opportunity yet awhile for proving your constancy. Our little party appears to be completely broken up.—Paul, here is your appointment as assistant to Colonel Redwood, the commissioner at Meerut; I am under orders to proceed immediately with my company to Goruckpore; while Saunders remains with the army.”

The captain handed me an official-looking document, which contained, as he had stated, a formal notification of my appointment as assistant to Colonel Redwood.

I thanked him heartily for his great kindness, but at the same time my heart sorrowed at the thought of leaving these friends, who had become so dear to me, and of once more facing the world alone.

Sara made no remark, but I noticed that her face too was sad at the thought of the coming parting.

“We must have a farewell dinner this evening,” the captain declared—“just Saunders and our four selves—and wish each other continued prosperity.”

Every one jumped at the proposal with alacrity; it provided a fresh subject for conversation, and helped to lighten the gloom which was rapidly overspreading us.

As my orders were to set out for Meerut on the following morning, it was incumbent upon me to have everything ready. The lieutenant also had many friends to visit; so, having promised to return early in the evening, we left Sara and her father to discuss the furnishing of the dinner.

I shall always remember that farewell party. We tried hard to be cheerful, but our efforts met with little success. The shadow of the past was with us, and perhaps also a fear of the future.

I thought of those others—of Mrs. Gurdon, of Rex and Charlie, of Mohammed Ali and his cruel fate—and their absence made me melancholy.

The new peer was the most successful in his attempts at gaiety, and when he left—which he was forced to do soon after dinner—an added sadness appeared to envelop the rest of us.

“Have you bought a palanquin and laid a dak to Meerut, Paul?” the captain asked.

“Yes, sir, though according to report there will be some trouble in getting through. Not that there is any danger,” I added hastily, for Sara began to look alarmed, “but one cannot depend upon the relays of bearers being always ready in time.”

“No; the rascals have no great liking for hard work. Still, as you say, there is no danger, only the inconvenience of delay.”

“And the certainty of laying up a stock of rheumatism, to be drawn upon on future occasions, if the roof of your palanquin be not thoroughly waterproof,” the surgeon remarked.

“Shall we see you in the morning, Paul?” inquired Sara.

“I fear not; I have arranged to start at dawn.”

We sat talking until the very last moment—until, alas!

movement on my part became imperative, and I rose from my seat.

The surgeon grasped my hand.

"Good-bye, laddie," he said, "and good luck. It is not likely that we shall ever meet again. I am returning to England in the summer; but news of you will reach me sometimes through the captain. Good-bye, my bonnie lad, and God bless you."

"Farewell, doctur," I answered warmly; "I shall never forget that twice I have owed my life to your skill and kindness."

"It is scarcely good-bye with us, Paul," the captain remarked cheerfully, "since my company will be stationed at no great distance from you."

"But will not the regiment soon be ordered home?"

"Yes, my boy. But I have no heart for England at present; I shall effect an exchange."

I shook his hand without speaking, and turned to Sara, who was weeping silently. I took her in my arms and kissed the tears from her face.

"Your father is right," I whispered: "it is not good-bye with us, but only a brief separation. In a short time we shall meet again."

She smiled at me bravely.

"I will try to believe in that," she made answer, and with a final farewell I sorrowfully went my way.

With the close of that evening ended the first chapter in my book of life.

With the morning's dawn I should be once more alone,

taking the first step in a new career, and I firmly resolved that no efforts on my part should be lacking to make it a successful one.

Luckily the gift of prophecy was denied to me, or surely my heart must have failed could I have foretold the dark and troublous times through which I had yet to pass ere my storm-tossed bark would sail into a quiet harbour.

I had fleshed my maiden sword in the dark defiles of dreary Afghanistan; it was destined that I should unsheathe it yet again on the fertile plains of the Punjab, where in a humble degree I should help to add that splendid country to the British possessions.

It was on the bloody field of Chillianwallah that Sara, who had long been my wife, lost her father, and we two were left alone.

Then for a space the years rolled by uneventfully. Little children climbed on my knees, and made me happy with their artless prattle.

I performed my duties faithfully, winning the confidence of the government, and rising by degrees to a high position.

But the gathering clouds again darkened the sky, and almost without warning we were plunged into the horrors of the great Mutiny.

Concerning that awful time I dare not even now trust myself to write save in the briefest manner.

We lived through it, my wife and I, and our little Reginald; but before the British flag once more waved

triumphantly over the unhappy land, three of our darlings lay buried in nameless graves.

Then with Sara and our remaining child I embarked for England, and after a prosperous voyage stood for the first time on the shore of my own land.

The doctor had been dead for years, but our old friend Lieutenant Brader, now Lord Weston, lost no time in giving us a hearty welcome, placing his house at our disposal until we were enabled to secure one for ourselves.

My story now is finished. The events which I have here attempted to chronicle have long since passed into history, but the British spirit displayed by the men who fell bravely fighting in the Afghan passes still survives, and many a gallant lad since then has echoed with his latest breath poor Charlie Durant's dying words, "They will say in England we have tried to do our duty."

THE END.

